

# **The Desiring Girl and Young Adult Fiction**

by

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## Declaration

I hereby declare that

*The Desiring Girl and Young Adult Fiction*

is my own work and that all the sources I have used have been acknowledged by means of complete references.

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Neither Very Bi Nor Particularly Sexual: The Essence of the Bisexual in Young Adult Literature. *Children's Literature in Education*. 46: 359-377.

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## Abstract

This thesis critiques the representations, and lacunas in representation, of teenage girls' sexual desires in a selection of young adult (YA) novels written since the turn of the millenium, considering their contributions either to a necessary opening up of a cultural discourse of girls' desire, or to the prevalent dangerous silencing of such a discourse. It takes as a point of departure the perspective that, to the extent that YA fiction engages with that which is sexy about sex, it is an ideal safe, private space for girls' exploration of their sexual subjectivities.

Through critical analysis informed by interdisciplinary and cross-disciplinary perspectives, as well as by autoethnographic life writing, the research uncovers a marked tendency for YA fiction to construct girls' desire as doubly wrong: girls are most commonly represented not only as the wrong gender for desire, but also as having individual particularities that are wrong for desire. Thus South African heroines are constructed as inhabiting the wrong country for desire, their desires inextricably linked to violence. Bisexual heroines are constructed as liking the wrong objects of desire, their desires desexualized, monosexualized, and submerged under essentialist stereotype. And conspicuous-breasted girls who experienced puberty early are constructed as possessing the wrong bodies for desire, representation of them among YA heroines largely an inhospitable absence.

The research supports, however, the contention that spaces for the liberation of a genuine discourse of girls' desire may be found in lesbian-focussed stories that hold themselves apart from the patriarchy of compulsory heterosexuality; and it finds that such spaces may also be carved out by heroines who interrogate their own desires in thoughtful, nuanced ways and, especially, by the exceptional few stories that engage with that which is sexy about sex, and thus open a discourse of desire through the direct evocation of desire itself.

**Key terms:** desire, sexuality, teenagers, young adult, bisexual, early puberty, Stephenie Meyer, Daniel Handler, SA Partridge, Adeline Radloff, Sonwabiso Ngcowa, Lily Herne, Julie Anne Peters, Brent Hartinger, Lili Wilkinson, Sara Ryan, Elizabeth Acevedo

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## **INTRODUCTION**

## Chapter One

### Missing or Troubling a Discourse of Girls' Desire

This thesis examines the representations of girls' desire in a variety of young adult (YA) novels written in the first two decades of the millenium, with the aim of teasing out and critiquing the ways in which various approaches to such representations either contribute to the development of a broader cultural discourse of girls' desire and pleasure, or undermine the possibility, and contribute to the prevalent silencing, of such a discourse. The different approaches to teenage girls' desire that I consider in this study include approaches to desire that may be troubled because of the gender of the desiring girl, because of the national context in which her desire occurs, because of the object(s) that she may desire, or because of the nature of her desiring and desired body.

I begin, in this chapter, with a discussion of the cultural invisibility of a discourse of teenage girls' sexual desire and, with it, of girls' own experience of the pleasure or sexiness of sex. I then discuss the role of YA fiction as a genre in such a discourse, both actually and potentially. Chapter One is followed by the first in a series of autoethnographic reflections on my own girlhood. Chapter Two discusses the partly autoethnographic methodology that gives rise to this life writing, and considers the importance of teenage girls' desire in greater detail, providing a feminist theoretical and conceptual framework for the subsequent

discussion of the novels. Together, Chapters Three and Four represent two ideologically opposed ways of approaching the (heterosexual) desires of a gender that contemporary Western culture does not associate with desire. Chapter Three examines the Twilight series, by Stephenie Meyer (2005; 2006; 2007; 2008), first among the texts I discuss in sales, popularity, celebrity and notoriety – and, as a result, first in cultural impact. Because of this impact, and because girls’ desire is a central thematic focus of the series, I devote more attention to it, and to critical and popular responses to it, than I do to any other YA text. Chapter Four then considers the contrasting approach to heterosexual girls’ desire of Daniel Handler’s (2011) *Why We Broke Up*. Chapter Five explores the occlusion of girls’ desire in favour of violence in the fictional South Africa of *Dark Poppy’s Demise*, by SA Partridge (2011), of *Sidekick*, by Adeline Radloff (2010), of *In Search of Happiness*, by Sonwabiso Ngcowa (2014), and of Lily Herne’s (2011; 2012; 2013) Mall Rats series. Chapter Six looks at representations of bisexual desire in Julie Anne Peters’s (2012) *It’s Our Prom (So Deal With It)*, Brent Hartinger’s (2007) *Double Feature: Attack of the Soul-Sucking Brain Zombies/Bride of the Soul-Sucking Brain Zombies*, Lili Wilkinson’s (2009) *Pink*, and Sara Ryan’s (2001) *Empress of the World*. In Chapter Seven I consider not representations of desire, but rather a lacuna in representation: the conspicuous-breasted early developing girl, whose body is read as inviting and expressing desire independently of her, and who is given a voice in only a single YA heroine that I have been able to find: X, in Elizabeth Acevedo’s (2018) *The Poet X*. Chapter Eight discusses the conclusions I draw from my explorations of these representations, and gaps in representation, of desire.

## Research limitations

It is important to note that conspicuous-breasted girls are not the only girls who are excluded from, or troubled in, fictionalized desire by their bodies. There are similar problems of representation for girls of colour, transgender girls, chronically or terminally ill girls, disabled girls, and overweight girls. The intersections of these girls' bodies, their desires, and the YA books written for and about them are an important area of research, but are beyond the scope of this thesis. My partly autoethnographic approach offers the potential for particular insights and perspectives on the novels I discuss, and the girls who seek to identify themselves within them. But it also points my research attention in specific directions, and necessarily limits my research area. An autoethnography informed by my experience as a white, cisgender, healthy, able-bodied, thin girl can offer no meaningful insights into the intersections of desire with colour, with transgender experience, with chronic or terminal illness, with disability, or with fatness; and these intersections cannot be separated from the rest of the experience of desire, or from an overall sexual identity. While I do briefly discuss two books whose heroines are people of colour (see Ngcowa 2014 and Hartinger 2007), and one series with a racially ambiguous heroine (see Herne 2011, 2012 and 2014), I am aware that my reading of these heroines, and my construction of many of the readers who might seek to identify with them, can never be complete.

Furthermore, as Deborah L. Tolman (2002a: 26) mentions, girls of colour are subjected to "intensive study and surveillance" because they are assumed to be

“more sexual”. Against this background, even without the limitations of autoethnography, I do not know how I could explore and analyze in depth the desires, and representations of the desires, of these girls without implicitly also colonizing and legislating them. I do not know how I could speak of these girls without speaking for them, which I do not believe it is my place to do. I am simply the wrong researcher for the task – and I have similar concerns about my appropriateness to speak of the desires, and representations of the desires, of transgender girls, chronically or terminally ill girls, disabled girls, and overweight girls.

### **Ways of knowing**

The fictional literary representations of desire that I examine in this thesis form one part of a large, often contradictory, body of textual and other media sources of knowledge about sex that is at times accessed purposely, and at times encountered incidentally, by children and teenagers. On the subject of such sources, Judith Levine (2002: n.p.) writes:

My own first sex-educational text, deciphered (not always successfully) at great length with my sixth-grade best friend, was *Peyton Place*. A few years later, I pored over the more instructive, but in its way no less melodramatic, *Penthouse*, left in plain-enough sight by the enviably worldly family in whose modern, art-filled house I babysat. Of course, like every other person in the developed world in the twentieth century, I learned to kiss from the movies.

Like Levine, I too learned to kiss from the movies, specifically, *Top Gun* (1986). I learned about sex from *Dirty Dancing* (1987), a film that does not contain a sex

scene, and from Madonna, Prince, and Alice Cooper. I learned a little bit from a cousin's description of a picture she had seen in a magazine belonging to her father.

Unlike Levine's, my first sex-educational text was in fact intended as a sex-education text: it was a picture book written by a married couple about where their son came from. It described the husband inserting his penis into a "special passage" between his wife's legs. I could find no special passage between my own legs (nothing in the book had led me to think that it might be useful to remove my panties when looking). At the tops of my thighs the flesh narrowed before meeting my pelvis. Might there be a small hidden hollow in that inner thigh flesh if my legs were pressed together? I thought it would be reaching to call such a hollow, if it existed, a passage, but there was no other contender. Evidently babies were made when women clamped their upper thighs around penises.

One reason why I did not learn as much as I might have from a sex-educational text was the writers' attempts at euphemistic child-friendly language, which left space for significant ambiguities. More importantly, there was their choice – political in fact if not in intention – to leave out a lot of quite crucial information, such as why anyone outside of a married couple wanting to make a baby might bring a penis into contact with an inner thigh. In other words, what was missing was any mention of desire, pleasure, or what Lydia Kokkola (2013: 14, 29) has called "the sexiness of sex":

As [Elizabeth] Grosz points out, carnal knowledge is kinaesthetic and affective knowledge, not cognition. She also points out that: "how-to' books on sexuality presume a certain principle of the

performance of a chore or task, not the uncovering of desire, which cannot be summarized, put into a formula or learned by rote” (Grosz 1995b: 285). Novels have more potential to address the “uncovering of desire” by viewing the experience from within the mind of the experiencing character. This is not the same as knowledge, but it is more likely to address the sexiness of sex than most reference books on sex education or parents or even peers.

My sex-education picture book supplied (some) cognition, and addressed ‘the performance of a chore or task, not the uncovering of desire’. *Dirty Dancing* (1987), even without a sex scene, engages intimately with desire, and with it the sexiness of sex, as does *Top Gun* (1986), as does much of pornography, as do Madonna, Prince, Alice Cooper and, in my opinion, the best YA novels that deal with sex and sexuality, such as Margaret Mahy’s ([1986] 2001) *The Tricksters*, Meg Cabot’s (2005) *Ready or Not*, Rainbow Rowell’s (2013) *Eleanor & Park* and, among the books discussed in this thesis, Sara Ryan’s (2001) *Empress of the World* and Elizabeth Acevedo’s (2018) *The Poet X*.

### **Pleasure, danger, and a “missing discourse of desire”**

For YA readers who are girls, however, neither their own desires nor whatever it might be that they find sexy about sex form part of most literary representations of sexuality or girlhood intended for them. Instead, female sexuality in YA fiction is frequently depicted, Beth Younger (2009: 2) shows, as “a threatening force”. This is at least in part because, as Kokkola (2013: 24, 4) argues, in contemporary Western/ized culture, “the well-intentioned desire to protect children has resulted in the vilification of carnal desire”; regrettably, however, when the focus

is on “victims of others’ carnal desire, the desiring teenage subject can remain invisible”. Kokkola makes this point in gender-neutral terms, but because, as Kimberley Reynolds (2007: 74) correctly states, girls read more fiction than boys do, most characters in, and most implied readers of, contemporary YA books are girls. As a result, the desiring teenage subject rendered invisible in YA fiction informed by a focus on sexual victimhood, like the potentially desiring teenage reader, is most often a girl.

A consideration of the invisibility of the desiring teenage subject in girls’ YA fiction informed by a focus on sexual victimhood uncovers some close parallels between girlhood within YA books, girlhood reading YA books, and girlhood in the broader culture, because teenage girls’ sexual desires remain invisible, and girls and women are associated with sexual victimhood, well beyond the limits of YA fiction. Carole S. Vance ([1984] 1992: xvi) foregrounds the relationship between pleasure (intimately related to desire) and danger (similarly related to victimhood) when she proposes that “the ambivalent and contradictory extremes women experience in negotiating sexuality” can be expressed through the concepts of “pleasure and danger”. (The idea of a tension between pleasure and danger has now become so foundational in the study of women’s sexuality that in 2005 the interdisciplinary journal *Sexualities* published a special issue under the rubric ‘*Pleasure and Danger Revisited: Sexualities in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*’.)

Vance ([1984] 1992: xvi-xvii) argues:

At the level of theory, the concept [of pleasure and danger] most powerfully speaks to the necessary feminist strategy on sexual matters: simultaneously to reduce the danger women face and to expand the possibilities, opportunities, and permissions for pleasure. Any strategy that focuses exclusively or predominantly on

one goal while ignoring the other will fail. To encourage a mindless expansion of sexual options, without critiquing the sexist structure in which sexuality is enacted and reducing the dangers women face, only exposes women to more danger. This defect has always been obvious to most feminists and for this reason it has never been a serious or attractive strategic option. More appealing to some feminists, in both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, is the single-minded concentration on eliminating sexual danger. An exclusive focus on danger, however, is just as perilous. It makes women's actual experience with pleasure invisible, overstates danger until it monopolizes the entire frame, positions women solely as victims, and doesn't empower our movement with women's curiosity, desire, adventure, and success.

Building in part on Vance's ideas, Michelle Fine (1988) has shown that, despite the 'perilous' nature of an 'exclusive focus on danger', for teenage girls the focus in many schools is heavily, even exclusively, skewed away from pleasure and towards danger. Fine's (1988: 30) influential research article 'Sexuality, Schooling, and Adolescent Females: The Missing Discourse of Desire' found that "standard sex education curricula" in the US included both "the authorized suppression of a discourse of female sexual desire" and "the promotion of a discourse of female sexual victimization". What is taught in schools helps both to shape and to reveal the discourses associated with teenage girls' sexuality, so that it is not only from school-based sex education, nor only in the US, that a discourse of girls' desire is missing. In South Africa, the Life Skills and Life Orientation curriculums ignore desire entirely and focus largely on sexual dangers, and a related need for responsibility (see Department of Basic Education 2011a: 54; Department of Basic Education 2011b: 18; Department of Basic Education 2011c: 12, 19, 20; Department of Basic Education 2011d: 15, 19). The predominant picture in local research on heterosexuality is, Tamara Shefer and Don Foster (2009: 269) find, also one of "young women as powerless

victims and young men as powerful perpetrators.” Such perspectives make it likely that teaching of curriculum items such as “Behaviour that could lead to sexual intercourse and teenage pregnancy, sexual abuse and rape” (Department of Basic Education 2011d: 15) will focus primarily, or even exclusively, on the behaviour of girls and dangers to girls. Beyond school, and from a multinational perspective, Sinikka Aapola et al. (2005: 151) point out that feminist and other “discourses critiquing sexual objectification seem to offer little room for discussing women’s desire and agency”. Tolman (2002a: 25)<sup>1</sup> discusses how research repeatedly demonstrates that “when girls do speak [to researchers] about their sexuality, they do not talk spontaneously about their own desire. That is, when girls do tell sexual stories, their own desire is left out”. Even in what Breanne Fahs (2010: 117, 126, 131) calls “the sex-obsessed culture of chastity”, there appears to be no recognition that girls as old as 15 might experience sexual desire, despite an overdetermined sense that such girls do very much need to be discouraged from having sex.

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<sup>1</sup> Cultural and moral discomfort with teenage girls’ sexuality make it difficult to secure funding for studies of what girls say about their sexual feelings and histories. There have thus been very few such studies. As a result, this thesis leans heavily on the findings of three pieces of research. Sharon Thompson’s (1990: 342) ‘Putting a Big Thing into a Little Hole: Teenage Girls’ Accounts of Sexual Initiation’ “explores teenage girls’ assessments of early sexual experience and first intercourse” in material “drawn from a 1978-1986 narrative study of 400 [American] teenage girls’ sexual, romantic, and reproductive histories.” Janet Holland et al. (1994), in ‘Power and Desire: The Embodiment of Female Sexuality’, reflect on accounts of heterosexual sex described in interviews held from 1988 to 1990 with 150 young women from London and Manchester; I have quoted only from their teenage subjects, although their interviewees ranged in age from sixteen to twenty-one. Finally, Deborah L. Tolman’s (2002a: 23) *Dilemmas of Desire: Teenage Girls Talk about Sexuality* reports on a 1991 study in which thirty American girls aged from 15 to 18 responded to “direct questions about their experiences of sexual desire.”

Despite this, Anita Harris (2005: 39) has argued prominently that “a genuine discourse of young women’s sexual desire” has in fact emerged since Fine identified it as missing in 1988, and that now, in “many ways, young women are afforded more opportunities to speak, enact and display sexual desire than ever before.” However, rather than a ‘genuine’ discourse grounded in girls’ desires, I would suggest, what has emerged is more accurately characterized as a false discourse grounded in postfeminist consumerism.

Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra (2007: 2) argue convincingly that postfeminist culture “works to commodify feminism via the figure of woman as empowered consumer.” Negra (2009: 4, 47) explains, furthermore, that postfeminist culture attaches “considerable importance to the formulation of an expressive personal lifestyle and the ability to select the right commodities to attain it”; as a result, it “has accelerated the consumerist maturity of girls”. Angela McRobbie (2008: 532) rightly points out that although commercial interests have long directed themselves towards girls, “this force is now accelerated and expanded with the effect that commercial values now occupy a critical place in the formation of the categories of youthful femininity.” Appearing “to adopt the interests of girls and young women”, McRobbie (2008: 533) says, commerce now “finds a licence to speak on their behalf. Companies draw on the language of ‘Girl Power’ as though to bestow on their products a sense of dynamism, modernity and innovation.”

Thus, while postfeminist culture does celebrate girls’ and women’s sexual desire, sexual freedom and sexual empowerment (see Tasker & Negra 2007: 2; Mallan 2009: 34; Jackson & Westrupp 2010), it does so in commodifiable forms that are

oriented to and expressed through consumption. In her argument that a discourse of teenage girls' desire now exists, Harris (2005: 40) herself states that:

young women's apparently new-found sassiness and sexual autonomy is spoken through fashion, television shows, music and books.... The feminist message that women are sexual subjects has become bound up with a neoliberal message about autonomy being well expressed through consumer choice. Asserting sexual desire is linked with the display of a consumer lifestyle and, in particular, the purchase of products.... This kind of accessorising of the sexual lifestyle enables the presentation of oneself as both a desiring subject and desirable product.

Harris (2005: 41, 39) argues, furthermore, that "the discourse of young female desire has been mobilized around the production of young women as new kinds of citizens – that is, as unencumbered consumers and workers." This discourse has emerged because public interest "in young women's sexualities has been stepped up since their roles in consumption and production have become central to late modern economies".

A discourse of young women's desire so utterly in service of interests removed from that desire is, in my opinion, suspect as a 'genuine' (to use Harris's word) discourse of desire. As Fine (1988: 33) points out:

A genuine discourse of desire would invite adolescents to explore what feels good and bad, desirable and undesirable, grounded in experiences, needs, and limits. Such a discourse would release females from a position of receptivity, enable an analysis of the dialectics of victimization and pleasure, and would pose female adolescents as subjects of sexuality, initiators as well as negotiators....

Instead of enabling an 'analysis of the dialectics of victimization and pleasure', or – as Vance's ([1984] 1992: xvii) perspective makes it natural to do – "critiquing

the sexist structure in which sexuality is enacted and reducing the dangers women face”, the discourse Harris describes seems to encourage the “mindless expansion of sexual options” that Vance correctly says “only exposes women to more danger.” Also, as a postfeminist phenomenon, this discourse is associated with what Tasker and Negra (2007: 10; see also Negra 2009) describe as “an idealized, essentialized femininity that symbolically evades or transcends institutional and social problem spots.” For Elana Levine (2010: 283), postfeminism “offers an especially powerful, hegemonic ‘common sense’ that incorporates and naturalizes certain aspects of feminism and thereby dismisses the continuing necessity of feminism as a political movement.” Neither feminist social critique nor ‘reducing the dangers women face’ are postfeminist concerns, and they thus have no place in the discourse of desire that Harris describes. Instead, this discourse seems to provide evidence for Negra’s (2009: 4, 4-5) assertions that “postfeminism fetishizes female power and desire while consistently placing these within firm limits”, and that “the female sexual desire which seems so unbounded and expressive everywhere in the popular culture landscape, often operates merely in mimicry of sexist codes of exploitation.”

For example, the products that Harris (2005: 40) lists as examples of what girls buy to assert their desire and autonomy include “bra tops and hot pants for pre-teens and, for older girls, clothes that encourage the proud display of round bellies and curvaceous buttocks”, as well as “T-shirts proclaiming ‘Fit Chick Unbelievable Knockers’”. As McRobbie (2008: 544) points out, the word ‘knockers’ is “typically associated with young men’s talk”, suggesting that girls

who wear such T-shirts have accepted a sexualized production of themselves that is expressed in boys' and men's terms.

Moreover, Harris (2005: 40) situates the consumption through which girls' supposed desires are expressed within a world of "sexually confident young pop stars such as Britney Spears, Destiny's Child and Christina Aguilera." However, as Tolman (2002a: 7; my italics) correctly argues:

At the same time Christina Aguilera sings about "what a girl wants, what a girl needs,"<sup>2</sup> she presents herself as a sex symbol, consciously turning her body into a commodity, an object of admiration and desire for others, *obscuring how or even whether her own desires figure* in her willingness to do "whatever keeps me in your arms."

The same can be said of Britney Spears in her sexualized schoolgirl costume with black bra uncovered, asking the boy who has left her to "Show me how you want it to be", and assuring him that "There's nothing that I wouldn't do", in the music video for '...Baby One More Time' (1998). Even when they are not singing about doing whatever boys want, the supposedly 'sexually confident' air of both singers is frequently embodied in pornographic iconography, as for example in Spears's November 2003 photographic shoot for *Esquire* magazine. In the accompanying article, Chuck Klosterman (2003: n.p.) writes, "On the day of our interview, Britney was photographed for this magazine wearing only panties and jewelry, and she pulled down the elastic of her underwear with her thumbs. If she had pulled two inches more, *Esquire* would have become *Hustler*." Spears's back is arched ecstatically to draw attention to her breasts, and her mouth is

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<sup>2</sup> The lyrics Tolman quotes are taken from 'What a Girl Wants' (1998).

promisingly open, but it is her knowing gaze that is most suggestive, and most suggestive of the pornographic magazine *Hustler*.

While the clothing items that Harris describes do in most cases undoubtedly display sexuality, it is difficult to see how they proclaim sexual *desire*, rather than sexual availability and desirability. Instead, like Spears and Aguilera, they seem rather to speak to what Negra (2009: 99; see also McRobbie 2004: 263; Gill 2007: 151; Attwood 2006: 81-82) considers “the recent reclassification of pornography as hip, ironic, and mainstream”. Ariel Levy (2005: 26) argues that “we have determined that all empowered women must be overtly and publicly sexual”, and that “the only sign of sexuality we seem to be able to recognize is a direct allusion to red-light entertainment”, so that “we have laced the sleazy energy and aesthetic of a topless club or a *Penthouse* shoot throughout our entire culture”. The effects of this cultural shift are evident even in YA fiction, where what has become publishable since the turn of the century would have been, in Kokkola’s (2013: 9) opinion, “unthinkable” before: examples that Kokkola lists include “adolescent prostitution (in Judy Waite’s *Game Girls*)” and “exchanging sexual favours for popularity or drugs (in Noel Clarke’s *Kidulthood*)”. Within this cultural context, Negra (2009: 99) argues:

female sexuality is ever more a quotation of itself. Since the job of a lap dancer or stripper is to feign sexual arousal, when the female sex worker is cast as the universal model for female sexuality, women’s sexuality is played out in an imitative mode and women’s actual sexual pleasure is at a further and further remove.

Harris (2005: 40) argues that “the articulation of the missing discourse of desire ... produces [young women] as new kinds of desiring subjects of, and desirable

objects for, (hetero)sexual consumption.” But desiring subjects of heterosexual consumption – whether lap dancers, strippers, or teenage girls hoping for boyfriends – have no more necessary equation with subjects that desire sexually than desirable objects do; to suggest otherwise is a logical fallacy. Adrienne Rich (1980: 637) has argued influentially that heterosexuality is a political institution. She points out that women are subject to an “economic imperative to heterosexuality and marriage”, and identifies both “covert socializations” and “overt forces which have channelled women into marriage and heterosexual romance” (Rich 1980: 634, 636). For Rich (1980: 647), heterosexuality is enforced “for women as a means of assuring male right of physical, economical, and emotional access”. Young women subject to what Rich (1980: 632) calls “compulsory heterosexuality” have, it seems, always been produced as desiring subjects of heterosexual consumption, even if their desires have not always been produced as sexual.

In the contemporary world, however, Emma Renold and Jessica Ringrose (2011: 392) argue correctly that girls are expected to perform as sexually knowing and desiring<sup>3</sup>. Girl Power postfeminism invites them to desire not only consumer products but also boys (Jackson & Westrupp 2010: 359). And, as Tolman (2002a: 6-7; original italics) says, the media make it clear that they should “be sexy for boys and not have their *own* sexual desires”. As our culture has mainstreamed pornography, so sexual desire has grown to be more desirable in women as desirable objects, and so compulsory heterosexuality has made it increasingly

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<sup>3</sup> Renold & Ringrose (2011: 392) point out that girls may, however, “rework and resist” such expectations.

necessary for girls to produce themselves as sexually desiring. Any links between such productions and actual sexual desires must be tenuous at best. Like Michelle Fine and Sara I. McClelland (2006: 300), I would argue that a “caricature of desire itself is now displayed loudly, as it remains simultaneously silent”; with Tolman (2002a: 7; original italics), I believe that “while *sexualized images* of adolescent girls are omnipresent, *their* sexual feelings are rarely if ever portrayed”. A culturally-sanctioned ‘genuine discourse of young women’s sexual desire’ is still missing, from contemporary YA literature as from the broader culture.

It is, however, possible that some girls do participate in an unofficial discourse of desire among themselves. Fine (1988: 35) believes that such a discourse, “though absent in the ‘official’ curriculum, is by no means missing from the lived experiences or commentaries of young women”. Sharon Thompson (in Levine 2002: n.p.), however, suggests that girls “spend hours and hours discussing what everyone wore”, but that they never ask anything like, “And did your vagina get wet?” But while a *discourse* of desire might be missing – certainly officially, and possibly unofficially – from many teenage girls’ lives, researchers and educators have repeatedly observed and argued that many girls do experience *desire* itself (see Aapola et al. 2005: 152; Holland et al. 1994: 29; Lamb & Peterson 2012: 709; Levine 2002: n.p.; Thompson 1990: 354-355; Tolman 2002a: 42-42). The “authorized suppression” of a discourse of this desire that Fine (1988: 30) identifies in schools would also seem to imply that the desire must, in fact, be believed to exist. And it is not by chance that Fine (1988: 30) determines that this suppression is conjoined, in much sex education, with “the promotion of a

discourse of female sexual victimization”, since heterosexual sexuality is, as Shefer and Foster (2009: 267) argue, “enmeshed with dominant constructions of gendered identities and practices, as well as with gender power relations, coercion and violence.”

Specifically, the triangle of danger/sexual victimhood, pleasure/desire, and girls/women is enmeshed in a complex of discourses about boys who cannot control their sexual desires, and girls who desire only relationships and emotional intimacy. These discourses have been used to great effect by many adults to police teenage sex: Fahs’s study of chastity organisations in the US provides several examples of such use. On the website of LifeWay, the organization behind the True Love Waits chastity movement, a counsellor (quoted in Fahs 2010: 122) writes: “Wouldn’t you agree that the main pressure for the girl comes from her boyfriend? She doesn’t want to displease or anger him because she might lose him, and then where would she be? So she says yes, when she really wants to say no”. A speaker (quoted in Fahs 2010: 130) at a Columbia University chastity club states:

Chastity comes much harder to men than to women. It’s no secret that the undisciplined male sex drive is monotonously predictable and frivolous. For men from 13 to 93 years of age, nothing ever seems to change, except perhaps the specific source of gratifying friction. Man’s arousal is so physical, indiscriminate, effortless, supersonic and imperious.

Rich (1980: 645-646) has argued influentially that this kind of “mystique of the overpowering, all-conquering male sex drive, the penis-with-a-life-of-its-own”, stems from a conception of an “adolescent male sex drive, which, as both young women and men are taught, once triggered cannot take responsibility for itself”.

One result of this conception is a social need to deny girls' desire. As Tolman (2002a: 15; original italics) argues:

Girls' *lack* of desire serves as the necessary linchpin in how adolescent sexuality is organized and managed. To the extent that we believe that adolescent sexuality is under control, it is adolescent girls whom we hold responsible, because we do not believe boys can or will be.

### **Girls' desire and YA fiction**

Such ideas are inevitably reflected in YA fiction, which has typically been a space for troubling girls' pleasures and desires. Roberta Seelinger Trites (2000: 85) argues that YA writing is "often an ideological tool" used by adult authors "to curb teenagers' libido". Kokkola (2013: 12; my italics) writes, similarly:

The vast array of novels depicting teenagers who are or have been sexually active reveal that many adult writers are deeply concerned about the on-set of carnal desire, and connect these desires with the *sturm und drang* of adolescence. The books they produce are also very often intended to educate young readers: *to offer them warnings* and to present successful navigations through this stress-filled period.

These novels of teenage sexuality – already situated within the primarily girls' domain of YA fiction – are, as Kokkola (2013: 12) points out, in most cases particularly "marked as being intended to appeal to female readers" by their elements of romance, something that is almost exclusively marketed to and culturally sanctioned for girls. In Kokkola's (2013: 165) opinion, even "very liberal writers ... seem afraid of female desire". Younger (2009: 23) observes that boys' desires are represented as "normal and natural, if often out of control", while girls' desires are "more frequently portrayed as abnormal or dangerous". If

YA fiction is indeed a tool used to curb teenage libidos, it would seem that the libidos – fictional and reader – that it curbs are generally female. Many YA novels, Trites (2000: 90) says, “imply that sexual liberation is a good thing, but that it is the girl’s job to make sure that male sexuality is not so liberated that she becomes victimized”.

Inevitably, there have been exceptions. Girls’ pleasures and desires do not have painful or damaging consequences in Judy Blume’s books. *Deenie* (Blume [1973] 2014), for example, takes not only pleasure but also comfort in masturbating, while Katherine, the heroine of *Forever* (Blume 1975: 177), enjoys regular pleasurable sex with her boyfriend and, after they grow apart and the relationship ends, thinks, “I’ll never regret one single thing we did together.” Younger (2009: 45) feels that Norma Klein writes with perhaps even more liberal attitudes to teenage sex than Blume, and Kokkola (2013: 42) suggests that Klein’s (1977) depiction of female sexual autonomy in *It’s Okay if You Don’t Love Me* “is still remarkable, even when judged by twenty-first century standards”. In Margaret Mahy’s ([1986] 2001) *The Tricksters*, the heroine, Harry, has sex not only without negative consequences, but also without heaviness, anxiety, soul searching, or portent. Harry’s story stunned me, when I was a girl, with the idea that good sex could be – in the most affirming of ways – unremarkable: an ordinary part of normal life.

Perhaps building on these early exceptions, the discourses of sex and desire reflected in YA fiction as a whole have been changing, particularly since the turn of the century. Kokkola (2013: 40) identifies a shift in how teenagers’ desires,

and the consequences of these desires, are depicted. Kerry Mallan (2009: 24) believes that the limits of children's and YA fictional "subject matter, language, and format are being pushed and pulled, at once breaking away and retreating. This is particularly evident in notions of how far to push the limits imposed on gender and sexuality". Reynolds (2007: 122) remarks "a movement from guilt and unease to *jouissance* when writing about sex for this audience [so that] the sexual experiences of young people in a growing number of novels are depicted as pleasurable and consequence-free". She notes that most books, even when they "show teen sex as natural, accepted, and enjoyable ... also continue to remind young people of the need to think carefully about and plan for sexual relationships", but she says that such books now emphasize safety rather than avoidance (Reynolds 2007: 122). She observes, too, that "girls are no longer portrayed primarily as victims or reluctant participants, only giving in to pressure from their boyfriends" (Reynolds 2007: 122). Such change is, however, gradual – the simultaneous 'breaking away and retreating' described by Mallan rather than a consistent, concerted movement. YA fiction remains, as Kokkola (2013: 40) says, "largely conservative"; neither older works, such as many of those analyzed in the existing research referred to above, nor more recent texts, including those that I will analyze in this thesis, most often reflect discourses of girls' desire and pleasure.

If we care about girls' safety and their sexual and mental wellbeing then this is regrettable, because the YA narrative is an extraordinarily apposite medium for the articulation of such discourses. Thompson's (1990: 358; my italics) research leads her to the conclusion that:

To take possession of sexuality in the wake of the anti-erotic sexist socialization that remains the majority experience, most teenage girls need an erotic education.... [Such an] education would be *narrative* as well as expository and provide a psychological context for understanding sexual experience.

This chimes well with Levine's (2002: n.p.) argument that narratives about sex and sexuality:

are more than stand-ins for the truth. Because so much of sexuality resides in the interstices between the body and what can be said about it in a textbook, these inventions are also the truth. Children need two kinds of information: the 'facts' and the truthful 'fictions', the stories and fantasies that carry the meanings of love, romance, and desire.

Narratives about sexuality are freely available to contemporary teenagers in fiction intended for adults, film and television, pornography, and YA writing. The strength of YA fiction over other narrative sources of 'erotic education', as I will argue below, lies in three things: it is, in some ways, able to engage with the sexiness of sex more freely than conventional film and television, or than pornography; it is predominantly a *girls'* genre; and so it is, more than any other narrative genre, a safe space for girls' exploration of their sexuality.

### **Fictions of desire, truthful and untruthful**

Levine (2002: n.p.) prefers fiction intended for adults as a source of erotic education for teenagers, because she dismisses most YA writing as conforming roughly to the same script: "Will he ask me to the prom? No, he won't. I'm going to die. Yes, he will. I'm saved! What should I wear?" That the limited script she

describes is unrepresentative should be evident to anyone working with YA literature. More importantly, however, a recommendation such as *Madame Bovary* (Flaubert 1856) – “Flaubert’s description of Madame Bovary’s trysts may be obscure to many teenage readers. But never mind. They can gorge themselves on the anticipation and frustration, jealousy and deceit, the despair and ecstasy of forbidden love” (Levine 2002: n.p.) – misses the point that if Flaubert’s writing is fundamentally adult in perspective and concerns then it necessarily *lacks* the perspectives and concerns of girlhood. This is not to say that girls should not read Flaubert, or be exposed to adult perspectives and concerns that may one day become their own. It is simply to recall that not all ‘truthful fictions’ are equally true to all lives, and that the truths of YA fiction have a relevance and immediacy that little other fiction can offer teenage readers. It is difficult to imagine anyone gorging themselves on Judy Blume’s flat prose, but if the value of truthful fictions for teenagers learning about sex lies, as Thompson (1990: 358) suggests in the quotation above, in psychological contexts and meanings, then *Forever* (Blume 1975) speaks more directly than Flaubert to teenage experience.

But there is more to an erotic education than psychological contexts or even Levine’s (2002: n.p.) “meanings of love, romance, and desire”. Considerations of context and meaning are not unconnected to kinaesthetic and affective knowledge, but they speak most directly to cognition about sex. Levine’s image of teenagers gorging themselves on Flaubert suggests the kinaesthetic and affective pleasures of reading – “the jolts and shimmer of books ... the moments that sent shivers up and down the spine” that Maria Tatar (2009: 11) remembers from her reading as a young child. In a teenager reading Flaubert, such jolts and

shivers would suggest both kinaesthetic and affective knowledge of sex, the parts of sexuality found ‘in the interstices between the body and what can be said about it in a textbook’: the sexiness of sex.

Not everyone agrees that fiction can impart kinaesthetic and affective knowledge. Reynolds’s (2007: 120) perspective on sexual YA writing is a purely cognitive one when she says that “empathising with characters and following their actions over time encourages readers to think about how situations and relationships develop and the consequences of different kinds of actions and responses”, and when she calls for “fictions that deal with the more everyday and prosaic problems and situations ... including how to put on a condom and how to work together to agree when both partners are ready and willing to start a sexual relationship”. Reynolds thus ignores the potential for kinaesthetic and affective knowledge in sexual narratives. Kokkola (2013: 14, 211), on the other hand, explicitly denies it. She rightly acknowledges that YA narratives have what she calls “enormous potential for contextualisation and providing ‘truthful fictions’ ”, but she argues that “book knowledge is most decidedly not the same as carnal knowledge”, and that:

When carnal experiences are transformed into the written word (or film or pornography for that matter), the core of the experience cannot be narrated. It is kinaesthetic knowledge and so cannot be passed on as cognitive knowledge. The text can only take the reader so far, the reader’s experiences and memories may enable further infilling, but neither language nor memory can infill the kinaesthetic or mental responses of one body to another. When writing for adolescent readers, who may well be wholly inexperienced, adult authors can attempt to bridge the gap between cognitive knowledge about and kinaesthetic experience of carnal desire by providing access to the thoughts and emotions of characters and so on, and as a result provide insights into the mind and prepare the youngster for experience better than any other

medium. Ultimately, however, literature cannot provide kinaesthetic experience, only cognitive knowledge and, more importantly, attitudes. (Kokkola 2013: 29)

I do not believe that this argument survives careful consideration. If the core of sexual experience is kinaesthetic knowledge of the kinaesthetic or mental (in other words, affective) ‘responses of one body to another’, then responses such as desire, arousal, pleasure or orgasm that involve only one body cannot be sexual – and this is plainly not the case. If consuming pornography does not arouse kinaesthetic and affective responses such as these, then it is not at all clear wherein its popularity lies (gripping plots? deft characterization? sparkling dialogue? witty humour?). And if the consumption of pornography does indeed provide kinaesthetic and affective experiences that carry the core of sexual experience, then the commercial and popular success of textual pornography from *Fanny Hill* (Cleland [1748-1749] 1985) in the eighteenth century to *literotica.com*<sup>4</sup> today strongly suggests that such kinaesthetic and affective sexual experiences can be conveyed in textual sex too. As Holland et al. (1994: 24) note, sex talk “is itself sexy, so accounts of sexual activity, or discussions of bodily states, can in themselves be physically arousing, erotic, titillating, voyeuristic”. As a result, literature can indeed provide the kinaesthetic and affective experience of arousal and desire, as it can give rise to kinaesthetic action leading to kinaesthetic and affective experiences of pleasure and orgasm. Any argument that these are not sexual experiences rests on an unsustainably

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<sup>4</sup>In addition to any number of visitors who are not members, this amateur narrative pornography website had 2 293 356 registered members as of 24 January 2019 (Literotica Discussion Board n.d.).

narrow definition of the sexual, as does any argument that such experiences are not part of what is meant by sexual knowledge.

When an exclusively cognitive approach such as Kokkola's is taken to actual sexual writing, not only further weaknesses but also unintended consequences emerge. James Joyce's ([1922] 1969) *Ulysses* was unbanned in the USA in 1933, on the basis of what Jonathan Dollimore (2001: 97) calls the "aesthetic defence" of art. I wish to recap Dollimore's discussion of this aesthetic defence briefly here, because it makes sense of many sex-positive critical responses to sexual YA writing. Dollimore (2001: 97) argues that this defence can be summarized in two claims: "first, that the truly literary work cannot, by its very nature, be obscene or pornographic; second, that its effect – at least upon those who have read it properly – is always and only aesthetic". In the *Ulysses* trial, the proponents of the aesthetic defence won an important victory against legal censorship. But Dollimore (2001: 97) says, nevertheless, that "their belief that true art is intrinsically incapable of damaging or 'corrupting' us is one which does not take art seriously enough". This is evident in Joyce's own words (quoted in Dollimore 2001: 98):

The feelings excited by improper art are kinetic, desire or loathing. Desire urges us to possess, to go to something; loathing urges us to abandon, to go from something. The arts which excite them, pornographic or didactic, are therefore improper arts. The esthetic emotion (I use the general term) is therefore static. The mind is arrested and raised above desire and loathing.

Joyce's argument celebrates a vision of art as entirely pointless and enfeebled, one that Dollimore (2001: 98) suggests "affects nothing, least of all its readers". But Dollimore (2001: 99) insists, instead, that:

what has been generally agreed to be art, just like almost any kind of representation, has the potential for kinetic effect, and literary theory since Longinus has recognized as much. Both history and theory would justify a use of 'kinetic' which included more than Joyce's 'pornographic or didactic' arts; here I mean it to include responses to art which are political, moral, religious and philosophical, as well as explicitly erotic and phantasmatic.

Dollimore (2001: 97-105) argues convincingly that aesthetic defences of art, in the Joyce trial as elsewhere, are in fact strategic lies, necessary first to defend art from censorship, and second because many of those who defend art *wish* to believe that it is safe. This wish leads to what he calls "safe interpretations of supposedly 'respectable'" texts, "either missing the truly significant, or just looking the other way, full of censorship by omission" (Dollimore 2001: 95). Dollimore (2001: 95) describes such "benign interpretations" as a more effective form of censorship than "blunt state censorship" that, he points out, very effectively "gives a platform to the voices of the enlightened". Thus he concludes that:

some of the most effective censors of art have been its most earnest defenders. As a result we find ourselves in a position today where significant dimensions of literature are avoided or persistently misrecognized by those who claim literary critical expertise. (Dollimore 2001: 97)

This position seems to me to have shaped the critical response to *Breaktime*, by Aidan Chambers ([1978] 1995). It is perhaps telling that I am forced to look to a novel about a teenage boy's sexuality and desire to illustrate the importance of Dollimore's (2001) arguments in the context of YA fiction; I know of no YA book that focusses on a girl's desire and has received copious critical acclaim without arousing popular anger. But the critical response to *Breaktime* (Chambers [1978] 1995) seems to me to be exemplary of both the weaknesses and the

consequences of a purely cognitive approach to sexual YA writing. Regardless of whether Dollimore or Joyce or most others would regard any YA text as ‘truly literary’, within the field of YA fiction Chambers’s novel stands out as a particularly and overtly literary work of art, and is generally responded to critically as such. Despite its representations of sex and masturbation, Reynolds (2007: 118) says:

far from offending critics and educationalists, *Breaktime* was applauded for its literary pedigree and stylistic panache. The National Association for the Teaching of English’s *News* called it “good intellectual fun” going on to note, “The Joyce rhythms are strongest in the narrative, but all the great anti-naturalists are there somewhere: Sterne (a grey page), Beckett, Flann O’Brien, maybe even Dylan Thomas...” (quoted on the back cover). The *School Librarian* similarly concentrated on its (meta)literary qualities....

Neither of these reviews, according to Reynolds (2007: 118), mentions the novel’s groundbreaking sexual content, and Chambers (quoted in Paul 2005: 233) states that in writing it he wanted to communicate the wholeness of the sex scene “without being prurient or erotic”. Reynolds’s (2007: 119) opinion – explicitly shared by Kokkola (2013: 45) – is that:

Although suffused with sexual desire and activity, *Breaktime* can hardly be described as a titillating novel. Its point is to stimulate the mind rather than the body, which presumably accounts for the critical response to the text: if readers are able to follow and enjoy what is going on, they are assumed to be sophisticated enough to deal with the content.

In this it seems to me that Reynolds and Kokkola – like Chambers – are forgetting, from their adult perspectives, just what might constitute titillation or eroticism for the ‘wholly inexperienced’ teenage reader that Kokkola posits when she argues that the kinaesthetic core of sexual experience cannot be

narrated. Holland et al. (1994: 24, 36) found incidentally during their research interviews that the sexiness of sex talk “can shift the definition of an interview – or an article – from a social to a potentially sexual context”; during their research, this led in one case to “what the interviewer describes as a ‘steamy interview’”. Unlike Holland and her fellow researchers, teenage readers are not trained or experienced in maintaining professional neutrality; sex talk is far more likely (although not inevitably) ‘steamy’ for them. I remember, at thirteen, seeing a flash of a book over someone’s shoulder and being thrilled and overwhelmed by the mundane sentence, ‘The sex was good.’ Without detail or description, the mere facts that sex exists, that some characters in a book have had it, that it was good, and above all that there are worlds in which it is so commonplace as to be mundane, might be sufficient to be experienced as erotic for some wholly inexperienced readers – as might, even more, the three and a half pages of sex in *Breaktime* (Chambers [1978] 1995: 126) that climax in “Mouth and hands and legs and / thrusting / driving / wild / relief / felt / during her / high / long / scream.”

Moreover, the very argument that the sex in this specific novel is not erotic or titillating implies that textual sex can in fact be erotic or titillating (even if *Breaktime* is not – or is not for some readers, such as Reynolds, Kokkola, Chambers, the National Association for the Teaching of English, a *School Librarian* reviewer, and presumably many other adults and teenagers). The insistence that *Breaktime* is a cerebral rather than an erotic pleasure (implicitly, for *all* readers) thus recalls what Dollimore (2001: 95, 97) calls the “safe interpretations” in which “significant dimensions of literature are avoided or

persistently misrecognized by those who claim literary critical expertise”. The aesthetic defence of *Breaktime* is, it appears, a strategic lie.

This lie may perhaps be very necessary, to protect *Breaktime* from very real censorship campaigns. *Forever* is a telling example of what non-literary sexual YA writing risks. It is considerably more moral and responsible about sex than *Breaktime*, even though it is more explicit, but it is notorious for its lack of literary merit. It is also, according to David Mellor (2012: 450), the “most challenged book in the school libraries of North America”, and Reynolds (2007: 120) notes that Blume is “one of the world’s most banned authors”. By contrast, the sex of *Breaktime* is ‘avoided’ and its eroticism ‘persistently misrecognized’ by critics because of its literariness; and as far as I know it has never been challenged or banned.

But preventing censorship may not be the only reason for the strategic lies that preserve *Breaktime* as a ‘safe’ text. Dollimore (2001: 104) argues strongly that such lies are also told because they are what many defenders of art *want* to believe, because they *want* art to be safe. I am persuaded that most professionals working in YA fiction – writers, publishers, librarians, teachers and academics – are genuinely well-intentioned people who care profoundly about teenage readers. As a result, many of us may very much want to believe that the sexual YA novels we champion are safe (if sterile) texts. The alternative might seem to suggest that we are promoting a sort of pornography for the young.

I myself am not suggesting that YA fiction is, or should be, a pornography of and

for teenagers. But I believe that those of us who wish to support girls' developing sexuality should acknowledge what I think those who wish to stifle it have always known. As Dollimore (2001: 97) says:

It's customary for ... enlightened voices to ridicule state laws against obscenity, and to regard others who support such laws as not merely authoritarian, but stupid as well. But these opponents of obscenity know, albeit perhaps in a stupidly authoritarian way, something about the power of art which the enlightened often do not. To take art seriously – to recognize its potential – must be to recognize that there might be reasonable grounds for wanting to control it.

What the parents, teachers and politicians who wish to control sexuality in YA fiction know is that books can provide not only cognitive understanding of characters' sexual feelings and desires, but also the experience (sometimes, although not always, erotic) of affective and kinaesthetic identification with these feelings and desires, and thus affective and kinaesthetic knowledge about sex and sexuality.

We must recognize the strategic lies we tell about this capability for what they are, so that we can consider their unintended consequences. When we avoid or persistently misrecognize the potentially erotic dimensions of YA fiction, we effectively help suppress teenagers' access to kinaesthetic and affective knowledge of sex, because we obscure the critical idea that such knowledge – far from being the smutty residue of a pornographic 'improper art' – is essential to an erotic education, and thus crucially valuable in YA fiction. If we wish teenage girls to incorporate the feelings of their own bodies into their sexuality, then we cannot deny the role of kinaesthetic and affective knowledge in their developing connections with their sexual bodies. If we hope that girls' sexual decisions will

be informed by their own desires, rather than by the desires of the boys or men they are with, then we cannot deny the role of kinaesthetic and affective knowledge in their developing awareness and understanding of their desires. If some girls sometimes experience some erotic arousal as part of the process of acquiring such knowledge, that is no price at all for the knowledge necessary to an embodied sexuality, and the potential for both sexual pleasure and sexual agency that that provides.<sup>5</sup> In obscuring this, our ‘censorship by omission’ gives solid practical support to those who wish to censor the books we defend.

For such knowledge is precisely what sex-negative parents and moral guardians have always feared about sexual writing. Indeed, some of these would-be censors might consider such knowledge not just inappropriate, but abusive. Focussing on sexual speech, rather than writing, some Christian activists have asserted that sex education is actual sexual abuse. Janice M. Irvine (2000: 64) writes that they:

condemn all classroom programs in which, they allege, a broad spectrum of words in a range of contexts rape, seduce, or molest in the moment of their utterance. One text announces that sex education is not education at all, but rather a “legalized form of child seduction and molestation.”<sup>6</sup> Another is entitled *Raping Our Children: The Sex Education Scandal*.<sup>7</sup>

From this perspective, Chambers’s writing should be criminalized, regardless of his careful intention to avoid eroticism. I believe, however, that we should instead be defending – even advocating – the sexiness of sexual YA writing. Like Levine (2002: n.p.; original italics) below, I am convinced that when concerned adults:

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<sup>5</sup> This potential will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Two.

<sup>6</sup> Irvine quotes from Randy Engel’s (1998) *Sex Education: The Final Plague*.

<sup>7</sup> This title is by Gloria Lentz, and was published in 1972.

search the public libraries like mine-sweepers for every *breast* and *screw*, every scene of masturbation or sex without retribution ... they do not deprive children of erotic information. Instead, they abandon the younger generation to a broad but shallow slice of sexual imagery – to the Hollywood hokum of puppy love and rape, the soulless seductions of the sitcom, and the one-size-fits-none spandex beauty of MTV.

This sexual imagery is not only ‘shallow’, but also worryingly homogenous and unrealistic – and its homogeneity and lack of realism are, to a large extent, demanded by the medium of the screen. Practical cinematographic considerations, such as which skin colours are conventionally easiest to light, or which kinds of bodies or body hair or body positions obscure or reveal detail, prompt sameness and unrealism. Screen sex requires that desire, pleasure and arousal be signified visually; the sexiness of a sex scene depends significantly on its visual appeal; and the age restriction imposed on a mainstream movie – which can dramatically affect its revenue – is in part determined by the nature of any sexual behaviour and nudity.<sup>8</sup> As a result, casting favours conventionally attractive leads whose appearance and bodies signify desirability and the capacity to arouse and, by implication, please. Rather than what might *feel* sexy or pleasurable, screen sex is choreographed for what *looks* sexy while keeping certain parts of the body hidden and obscuring any sexual specifics that might attract higher age restrictions.<sup>9</sup> This avoidance of specifics, operating together

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<sup>8</sup> In South Africa, for example, children under 16 are restricted from watching “details, close-ups or slow motion of sexually-related activity” (Film and Publication Board 2014: 14), including “kissing, caressing, embracing, and physical intimacy” involving even parts of the body not generally considered intimate (Film and Publication Board 2014: 9).

<sup>9</sup> The Motion Picture Association of America strongly cautions parents against allowing children under 13 to view films that contain what it calls “sensuality” (Motion Picture Association of America 2010: 7), which it does not define. It requires children under 17 to be accompanied by an adult guardian in films with

with visual shorthands for passion, arousal, pleasure and emotional affinity, means that heterosexual screen sex is invariably penetrative, penetration is always easy (even though foreplay is generally limited to a little kissing, and possibly a hand caressing a pert breast or a well-muscled and depilated chest), and orgasms (women's are vaginal, rather than clitoral) are inevitably simultaneous.

There are of course many notable exceptions, but sexual narratives of the screen conventionally are not 'truthful fictions'. Neither are traditionally punitive YA novels, of course, but scaremongering untruths are not enjoined by the novel form, while untruths that facilitate visual signification are enjoined by the medium of the screen. In addition, the age considerations that encourage still more untruths are far less rigid for YA fiction than for screen media: as Reynolds (2007: 15) states, "there is a clear distinction between the amount of regulation and scrutiny applied to narrative forms such as television, films, comics, magazines, and computer games, and that given to children's literature". And while the untruthful tendency to scaremongering of YA fiction may, as mentioned above, be changing, movie and television narratives of sex and sexuality are currently being pushed still further from truthfulness. Despite the popularity of pornographic writing, pornography is primarily a visual genre. Its cultural mainstreaming has thus had a particularly powerful effect on visual

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"sexually-oriented nudity" (Motion Picture Association of America 2010: 8). And it excludes children under 18 from films that contain "sex" and "aberrational behavior" (Motion Picture Association of America 2010: 8), neither of which it defines. It may thus be safest for filmmakers to avoid suggesting the specifics of sexual activity, in case these specifics fall into either category, and earn the movie a rating that prevents wide release.

narratives. If it is true, as Ariel Levy (2005: 26) suggests and as I have discussed, that “the only sign of sexuality we seem to be able to recognize is a direct allusion to red-light entertainment”, then when screen sex is choreographed for what looks sexy, it is pornographic iconography, and a pornographic mode, that signify the most widely-recognized appearance of sexiness.

Pornography itself – both softcore and hardcore – is easily accessible online, on sites which usually include at least some free content, with age restrictions that can usually be circumvented merely by asserting that one is over 18. Reynolds (2007: 117) believes that every previous generation has shown that “in the absence of specifically targeted basic information, the young turn to less appropriate, often more explicit or salacious sources, however unreliable and despite the availability of officially disseminated literature”. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, abandoning girls to their own search for basic sexual information may often imply abandoning them to the explicitness, the frequent misogynies, and both the harmless and the dangerous kinks and fetishes of pornography, as well as to the wildly unrealistic view of sexual negotiation, mechanics, safety, pleasure and desire that it most often represents.

Unrealistic as it is (and an inexperienced teenager might not always recognize unrealistic representations as such), this representation of sexual mechanics, pleasure and desire – absent from most other sources of sexual knowledge for teenagers – is the one easily-overlooked advantage of a pornographic education. The basic information about sex that teenagers need is not only knowledge about condoms and babies and sexually transmitted infections, but also knowledge

about what might give pleasure where, about desire, about the sexiness of sex. I do not imagine that many teenagers who watch pornography will stop doing so if other sources of information engage with the sexiness of sex. In fact, as I have mentioned, some YA novels already do so, although they are still exceptional; and film and television already do so, although the stories they tell about pleasure and desire are usually shaped and limited by their medium. But it is worth noting that Thompson's (1990: 351, my italics) research suggests that girls who enjoy sexual agency, including the agency to wait until they feel themselves ready for sex, "describe *several sources and forms* of precoital knowledge and experience". There are no good options for girls limited to choosing between either discourses that deny their desires and disconnect them from their bodies, or (both mainstream and adult) entertainment industry discourses that – at their rare best – celebrate narratives of girls' and women's desires and pleasures but subordinate them to a variety of film-making demands. What I would thus like to see is a greater *variety* of narratives and discourses on sex, pleasure, desire and sexiness for teenage girls.

Such variety would offer more options and better ones to girls exploring their sexual subjectivities. Like Fine (1988: 35), I believe that there are "too few safe spaces" for such exploration, but for young women YA fiction can and should be one of these spaces. Reynolds (2007: 117) suggests that reading allows teenagers to "choose when they want to engage with the facts and issues", and that teenagers like the fact that it is a private activity. Watching a movie, television or even pornography, by contrast, is often a social event. Viewers thus often have less control over what they watch than readers have over what they

read, and it is thus also less revealing and embarrassing either to stop reading than to stop watching (if a girl is uncomfortable, and not (yet) ready for what she is learning) or to read repeatedly than to view repeatedly (if she is coming to understand what she is learning by increments, or through kinaesthetic and affective identification). The privacy of reading is particularly important for girls, always subject to the imperative of postfeminist compulsory heterosexuality that they present as sexually knowing and desiring, as well as to the risks of the sexual double standard should they do so.

As well as a private space, YA fiction is also, as I have discussed, primarily a girls' space: marketed to girls, culturally sanctioned for girls, about girl protagonists, and implying girl readers. Ana C. Garner's (1999: 85, 107) study of "the influence of adolescent fiction on the identity constructions of 84 adult women" concludes that the books the research subjects read as girls empowered them because they chose to read about characters "who affirmed their own sense of being, desires and wants, possibly experiences and gave them the feeling that there was more than one way of being". Garner (1999: 107) says that these girls thus felt that in "their books and hearts they could be anyone without fear of rejection". Tatar (2009: 4) writes that through stories young children "want to light out for new territory and make those symbolic stories work for them, using them as road maps for navigating the real world". Teenage readers, already navigating a much wider world, might use YA fiction to observe and test different ways of doing so. This possibility speaks to how YA fiction allows teenagers – and particularly girls, for whom sexual knowledge poses particular risks – to acquire knowledge, in Reynolds's (2007: 120) words, "vicariously and without risk to themselves".

Broadening their own experience through the experiences of a variety of fictional characters, it enables girls to safely explore and experiment with different ways of being sexual without having their hearts broken, their names written on toilet stall walls, or their bodies impregnated, infected, hurt or violated. As an exceptionally safe space for girls, to the extent that YA fiction engages with the sexiness of sex by addressing not only cognition, but also affective and kinaesthetic sexual knowledge, it is an ideal space for their exploration of sexual subjectivities.

Understandably, many parents see their own explanations as preferable to even the safest narrative sources of knowledge about sex. But most parents and children, Levine (2002: n.p.) suggests, are uncomfortable talking about sex with each other, and tend to avoid it if they can. Thompson (1990: 350, 354, 351), similarly, found that it was only among the minority of girls in her sample who told stories “of sexual curiosity, exploration, and pleasure” – the small group that she calls “pleasure narrators” – that there were reports of comfortable, open conversations about sex and pleasure with mothers. This is not surprising because, as we have seen, talk about sex is itself sexy, so talk about sex between parents and children always risks violating incest taboos (Levine 2002: n.p.; Kokkola 2013: 13). Furthermore, as Kokkola (2013: 13) perceptively recognizes:

it is extraordinarily difficult to describe a physical or emotional event without revealing personal experiences. Teachers and parents cannot describe the sexiness of sex without revealing something of their own feelings, preferences and experiences, and youngsters cannot ask about the sexiness of sex without revealing their own interests.

It is also the case that many parents would not choose to address the sexiness of sex with their children even if they could do so without embarrassment: as a matter of principle they prefer a discourse of sex negativity to one that celebrates their daughters' pleasures and desires. In such families, parent-child talk cannot be described as a safe space for exploring sexual subjectivities. Fine (1988: 36) observed, for example, a sex education class in which teenagers were told to talk to their parents before having sex:

[One girl] initiated what became an informal protest by a number of Latino students: "Not our parents! We tell them one little thing and they get crazy. My cousin got sent to Puerto Rico to live with her religious aunt, and my sister got beat 'cause my father thought she was with a boy." For these adolescents, a safe space for discussion, critique, and construction of sexualities was not something they found in their homes.

Nevertheless, this is not to suggest that parents should not talk to their children about sex; I believe that they should, and I think it is significant that many of Thompson's pleasure narrators could listen and talk openly with their mothers about sex (Thompson 1990: 354). But I do want to point to the advantages of YA fiction as – in Kokkola's (2013: 210) words – "a place where adults can communicate directly with adolescents", but that, "unlike teacher-child or parent-child discussions of sexuality", is "less imbued with embarrassment and the need to maintain personal boundaries".

Most importantly, I want to draw attention to the way that YA literature, according to Karen Coats (2011: 320):

is itself dialogic – that is, it participates in the vibrant and constantly shifting cultural dialogue regarding what we value and how our lives might be lived both responsibly and responsively in the face of increasing globalization, perspective-altering

technologies, and ideological challenge and change.

This cultural dialogue is enriched by variety in voices and perspectives. The conventionally untruthful fictions of the film, television and pornography industries are already voicing their perspectives. Parents can and should voice theirs. But the perspectives of untruthful fictions might also be especially well offset by the perspectives of other, potentially more truthful, fictions: the safe and girl-centred fictions of YA literature.

## **THEORY AND METHODOLOGY**

## ***Girl Re-Membered***

*Like everyone else I know, I was socialized as straight. My desires diverged early from this socialization – more of that later – but my identity did not. I grew up living as straight – thought to be, and thinking myself, straight. I was immersed in straightness, accepted into and accepting of it. Culturally, I was a straight girl. And what strikes me most forcibly now about my sexual and gender socialization was that it gave me no conceptual vocabulary with which to express my desires. When it came to sex, I could say “You can” or “I can let you”, but never “I want”.*

*I met Alan<sup>10</sup> at my church’s youth group. We were friends for a while, and then he left a letter under the windscreen wiper of my mother’s car, telling me at great and circumloquacious length that he wanted us to be girlfriend and boyfriend. It was marvellous and frustrating. We talked all the time. We flirted all the time. We held sweaty hands desperately, and glanced, yearning, at each other from under our eyelashes. But several weeks into our relationship he had yet to kiss me, and I was beginning to wonder if he ever would. (It’s fascinating, and more than a little horrifying, to me to observe that even now, more than a quarter of a century later, as soon as I try to reinsert myself into the mindset I had as a teenage girl, formulations such as ‘I hadn’t kissed him yet’, or even ‘We hadn’t kissed yet’, simply don’t occur to me.) I was horribly frustrated until, to my great relief, his best friend made a snide comment outside Alan’s hearing about good girls who were teases. Having no vocabulary for my own desires had taught me nothing if not how to seize*

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<sup>10</sup> *With the exceptions of my mother’s name and my own childhood nickname, all names in the life writing of this thesis have been changed.*

*what I wanted when it was fortuitously offered, so I humphed a lot and said meaningfully that I hadn't stopped Alan from doing anything. (I could hint at "I'd let", but not at "I want".) Evidently this sort of circuitous obliqueness was neither a unique nor an incomprehensible way for straight girls to communicate, because it wasn't long before Alan finally, belatedly, kissed me.*

*I feel I should apologize to all the girls who have struggled or failed to avoid unwanted kisses, and more, from boys and men taught by girls like me to comprehend invitation in equivocation. But I take no responsibility for the inability to say either "Yes, please" or "No, thank you" that rendered that equivocation necessary. Indeed, the second thing that really strikes me about my sexual and gender socialization is that this was a comedy that could have turned out to be a tragedy, because the corollary of not being able to say "I want" is not being able to say "I don't want". If the first is irrelevant then so must be the second, and when it came to sex, I could say "You can't" or "I can't let you", but never "I don't want".*

*Fortunately, the results of this, too, turned out – in my case – to be comic (if not precisely funny) rather than tragic. I met Jaco on holiday at the seaside. He wore glasses and I thought he looked pensive and sweet, like John-Boy on The Waltons (Rich et al. 1972-1981). (He was neither, and that is the danger of metonymic thinking, but what did I know at thirteen?) We flirted intoxicatingly for days and then, on the beach and under the stars, he kissed me.*

*I thought he must have the biggest mouth in all the world; certainly the biggest tongue, which he thrust aggressively in and out of my mouth. Our teeth clashed and*

*grated repeatedly. He tasted of stale cigarette smoke. Certainly I experienced the opposite of pleasure, but as the kiss went on and on – and on! – I was, more than anything else, bored. Kissing was allowed on my moral scale of sexual activity, so I knew of no way to stop him. I feared, but also partly hoped, that he might try to feel my breasts. This was not allowed, and would have enabled me to say “You can’t”, and break the moment. Unfortunately, he had clearly read me right, and knew what not to try, so I lay pinned to the sand by his monstrous tongue and tried to find something interesting to think about to pass the time. When a sudden confusing flash of torchlight heralded my mother, come to find me because I was out too late, relief outstripped even my very considerable embarrassment.*

*Naturally, I went home at the end of my holiday to tell my best friend a breathless story about starlit kisses and the sound of waves breaking on the shore. A story about either pleasure or the lack of it would have been inconsequential. A story about romance, which might provide a perspective on love, was more apt as well as happier, and from a romantic point of view, my horrendous seaside kiss had been both pleasure and exhilarating, electrifying thrill.*

## Chapter Two

### A Feminist Autoethnographic Perspective

#### The autoethnographic girl

John Freeman (2015: 919) writes that:

the methodologies of memoir, autoethnography and creative non-fiction have become so commonplace in the arts, humanities, health, education and social sciences that they are now, in a great many instances, little more than mantras, so that in too many authors' and postgraduate students' hands self-writing has come to honour no audience greater than itself.

Freeman (2015: 920) argues, furthermore – and it is easy to find a quantity of published autoethnography that justifies his argument – that “all writing balances on the razor-edge of deception and description but few forms self-delude better (or worse) than autoethnography.” Having been the kind of girl who is portrayed in the novels I discuss in this thesis, as well as the kind of girl who reads such novels and looks for and learns about herself in them, and indeed constructs herself from them, my research has a profoundly personal meaning for me. In making use of a partly autoethnographic methodology, I judge, thus, that I am at severe risk of self-delusion, severe risk of honouring no audience beyond myself. I take this risk anxiously, but consciously. I wish to be clear about the limits of what I believe the autobiographical elements of this research might be able to achieve. I wish to maintain my own consciousness of my intentions with these elements, in the hope that I may avoid the

masturbatory, navel-gazing replacement of methodology with mantra that Freeman (see 2015: 925, 924) warns against.

When I began writing this thesis, I felt I had to find a balance between the conflicting demands of a moral imperative to politicization, and a conventional imperative to a neutral scholarly voice. My balance was teetering, at best. Freeman (2015: 925) notes that the traditional scholarly assumption of “a sense of borrowed objectivity ... is often no more than the *language* of objectivity”. In my case, certainly, my feelings, prejudices and experiences had inevitably informed all my expectations and interpretations, and had also leaked glaring – but disingenuously unacknowledged – from all that I had written.

As I continued to write and, more importantly, to read, it became increasingly clear to me that the most thought-provoking and illuminating feminist and queer theorists and researchers that I was studying – writers like Kenji Yoshino, Deborah L. Tolman, Jonathan Dollimore, Leo Bersani – not only explicitly took personal conviction and experience as a point of departure, but frequently even wrote themselves – pushy, importunate, messy, moving – into their scholarship. The conflict between the moral and conventional imperatives that I had felt upon my writing began to dissolve into a new ethical demand and ethical *space* for me to be more explicit about my own experiences as they informed and directed my reading, thought and writing. A traditionally neutral, self-effacing scholarly voice would be not only disingenuous but also inappropriate to my field. The ethical calls for honesty about the personal experiences that both enlightened and biased my thinking, for an approach that was in tune with the most

transformative scholarship in the fields in which I was reading, and for a more complete, more osmotic, transfer of my understanding of my subjects, demanded that I insert myself almost violently into my text.

Three decades before me, inevitably, the social sciences and humanities had already worked (far more thoroughly than I had) through many of the same tensions that I was belatedly struggling with. The ethical and scholarly space I was discovering that would allow me to insert myself into the writing of my research, acknowledging and representing the way in which I had always already been present in the reading and thinking of it, had been opened up in response to what has been called the “crisis of representation” (see Denzin 1997: 3-5) in these areas of study. David Butz and Kathryn Besio (2009: 1662) describe how, during this crisis:

Standard scholarly conventions of representing the worlds of others were criticized for reproducing a discourse of academic authority and objectivity – a ‘God’s eye view’ – and of claiming a descriptive and analytical coherence, that were not epistemologically tenable. In particular, by absenting themselves as subjects from their writing ... researchers were able to avoid the partiality and positionality of their knowledge claims, thereby protecting the illusion that their objects of study were unrelated to the subjectivity that produced knowledge about them.

The emergence of autoethnography as a serious, scholarly, and meaningful research method represented one of the ways in which researchers tried to address these problems. Butz and Besio (2009: 1671) explain that what unites the variety of ways in which autoethnographic researchers choose to represent themselves in their research “is that they all strive in some way to collapse the conventional distinction between researchers as agents of signification and ...

research subjects as objects of signification.” Here I had found the space that would allow for that violent insertion of myself into my research text that I was looking for. And with it came a suggestion that what I would gain from such an insertion might be not only intellectual honesty but also greater understanding, as Butz and Besio (2009: 1662) write, furthermore, that autoethnography “radically foregrounds the emotions and experiences of the researcher as a way to acknowledge the inevitably subjective nature of knowledge, and in order to use subjectivity deliberately as an epistemological resource.”

Carolyn S. Ellis and Arthur P. Bochner (2006: 433-434) emphasize the activist nature of autoethnography when they argue that it “shows struggle, passion, embodied life, and the collaborative creation of sense-making.... Autoethnography wants the reader to care, to feel, to empathize, and to do something, to act. It needs the researcher to be vulnerable and intimate.” Ellis and Bochner (2006: 433-434) wish “to move ethnography away from the gaze of the distanced and detached observer and toward the embrace of intimate involvement, engagement, and embodied participation”, and they see a route for this movement in a mode of enquiry that they say “was designed to be unruly, dangerous, vulnerable, rebellious, and creative”. And Norman K. Denzin (1997: 228) gives a name to the osmotic transfer that I experienced reading Yoshino (2000; 2006), Tolman (2002a; 2006), Dollimore (2001) and Bersani (1995), and that I feel called to attempt in my own work, when he argues that evocative ethnographers (including those who produce the kind of evocative autoethnography that Ellis and and Bochner describe) “bypass the representational problem by invoking an epistemology of emotion, moving the

reader to feel the feelings of the other”. Denzin (2006: 421, 422) thus values “messy vulnerable [research] texts that make you cry”, and links such texts to the political when he seeks a research tradition built on the understanding that:

Ethnography is not an innocent practice. Our research practices are performative, pedagogical, and political. Through our writing and our talk, we enact the worlds we study. These performances are messy and pedagogical. They instruct our readers about this world and how we see it. The pedagogical is always moral and political; by enacting a way of seeing and being, it challenges, contests, or endorses the official, hegemonic ways of seeing and representing the other.

The study of children’s and young adult (YA) literature, like ethnography, is not an innocent practice. Our research practices are a performance of the hegemony of adulthood at the heart of children’s books. These are supposedly *for* children, but it is never quite clear to me what that might mean outside of marketing and library or store shelving policies, given that they are written, illustrated, published, marketed, sold, selected for shops and libraries, taught, analyzed and, most often, reviewed and bought by adults. Children’s literature is, as Perry Nodelman (1992: 33) says, an “imperialist” activity. Nodelman quotes Edward Said (in Nodelman 1992: 29):

Orientalism can be discussed and analyzed as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient – dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it; in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient.

And Nodelman (1992: 29) argues systematically and convincingly for a parallel in which:

Child psychology and children’s literature can be discussed and analyzed as the corporate institution for dealing with childhood – dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of

it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it; in short, child psychology and children's literature as an adult style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over childhood.

Children's and YA literary research thus enacts ways of seeing children and the children's book world, ways of being in a variety of roles within that world, and ways for that world to be: for example, ways in which the genre of children's and YA fiction might be seen as, or become, a fundamentally neutral or an inherently political one; ways in which child and teenage readers might be seen as, or become, *tabulae rasae*, subalterns, or agential actors; ways in which adult writers might be seen as, or become, apolitical entertainers, conscientious educators, or benevolent social colonizers. Through these enactments, our work challenges, contests, or endorses the official, hegemonic ways of seeing and representing the other – specifically, children, who are always the other in the production, dissemination, and scholarship of what are called their books. I have said that the most thought-provoking and illuminating writing that I have read in feminist and queer scholarship has tended to write the author into the research; it appears that these messy, vulnerable, and highly politicized fields somehow call for messy, vulnerable, personal scholarship in the same way that they call for political scholarship. It seems to me that research in children's and YA literature – a messy, vulnerable, highly political field in its own right – might plausibly sound a similar call.

Sharing my experience – sharing myself – in my research is thus a specifically and, I believe, an appropriately political act. Ellis and Bochner (2006: 439) write that autoethnography “brings us into lived experiences in a feeling and embodied

way. This is the moral of autoethnographic stories – its ethical domain.” By evoking my own lived experiences of girlhood as a reader, a desirer, a bisexual, the inhabitant of a body that was early and obtrusively sexual, I wish to place the girl readers of the texts that I examine squarely and unavoidably in my readers’ views, as these girls are in mine. This is the ethical domain of my self-narrative attempts. I want to force a contemplation, an acknowledgement, of the desiring girl, the bisexual girl, the obtrusively sexual(izable) girl before discussing the YA literature of each, because these girls are all girls that we adults do not want to see.

Looking can be both a sexual and an objectifying act, and these girls are too young for our sexual gaze and too often already objects of such a gaze. This is part of why we do not want to look at these girls, and part of why their literatures often provoke such discomfort. But looking is also an ethical and political act, a necessary first step towards relinquishing a degree of power over – allowing a degree of agency in – what has been forced to live unseen, and that is another reason, less principled and more difficult to admit, why we choose not to see these girls and why their literatures so often provoke such discomfort. Writing these girls, and writing *for* them, are part of such looking, part of this necessary first step. Scholarly contemplation of such writing can be another part. But contemplating the literature of the girls we have, wittingly or unwittingly, tried to unmake by unseeing is meaningless if our point of departure is not a focussed contemplation of the girls themselves. After presenting a paper that would eventually become Chapter Six of this thesis at a conference, I was asked, both apologetically and sympathetically, if it was not very difficult to work on

books that, from the passages I had quoted, seemed to be so very *bad*. Now, I will say that some of the books that I discuss in this thesis are better written than others. But all of these novels, in my opinion, are most meaningful in relation to the girls whose worlds they help constitute, so for me there is little reward in studying this corpus purely on its literary merits, little point in discussing these girls' books if we cannot first simply look at the girls themselves.

Of course, I am not a girl. My lived experiences of girlhood reading, desire, bisexuality and embodiment are mediated by memory; by adult knowledge and experience; and by scholarly, popular, and activist reading on sexuality, on children's books, and on reading itself. And, as Freeman (2015: 925-926) points out, "whilst autoethnography's implicit and often explicit claim is that this is just me writing my story within the particular complexities of my life, the subject who writes today is never and can never be the same subject who acted yesterday". Even less can I write today as the same subject who acted decades ago within a culture of youth that is both distinct from and crucially subordinated to the culture of adulthood to which I now belong. But I do not present my memories of girlhood as fact or data; I am not engaged in a primarily ethnographical project, nor am I the primary subject of my own research. The primary thing that I am, in relation to this thesis, is a researcher. But I am a researcher with a personal, not solely a professional, stake in this research, and so I think that ethics require of me what Butz and Besio (2009: 1662) have described as a "representational outcome – the performance, in a sense – of a process of *critical reflexivity*": autoethnography.

Similarly, because my research focus includes girls who are already routinely and critically objectified for their girlhood, their desires, their sexuality, and/or their bodies, I think that ethics require me to try to disrupt that “conventional distinction between researchers as agents of signification and ... research subjects as objects of signification” that Butz and Besio (2009: 1671) see collapsed in autoethnographic research. So I insert myself as object of signification into the work of myself as signifying subject: I mess up the boundaries between roles by straddling them. I feel a similar ethical call, and for the same reason, to try to disrupt the hegemonic, colonialist distinction between adults as agents of signification and girls as objects of signification. Wishing to direct an adult gaze upon the often-unseen girls who are spoken to and spoken for in the books I examine, but wishing to obstruct, even embarrass, the objectification of such a gaze, I insert my own re-membered self, doubly objectified as a child and a girl, but mediated and empowered by my adult self: in this case it is the boundaries between age groups that I straddle and mess up, and I recast the girl who used to be me as an object that signifies, a colonial subject that defies, a challenging object that sees the gaze of the adult researcher and gazes back, demanding a response.

In doing this – determinedly pushy, intentionally importunate, probably messy, possibly occasionally moving if I am both lucky and successful – I hope to provide a focus point for my readers in lived experience. The girl that used to be me is not evidence. She is not required to be. I will tell no lies about her, and will represent her strictly as I sincerely believe she was, but she is a (re)construction and cannot but be to some degree fictionalized: you are perfectly welcome to

treat her entirely as a fiction if you wish. Her function in this thesis is to invoke an epistemology of emotion, to say: “Here was a girl who desired, whose objects of desire were both male and female, whose body proclaimed sexuality earlier and more loudly than was wanted. Look at her. If she provokes you, bores you, worries you, discomfits you, if she moves you to anxiety or empathy or judgement or pity or irritation or amusement or disgust or antipathy or affection, remember these feelings when you think about the books that have been written for such as her.”

### **A feminist perspective on the missing discourse of girls’ desire**

Having established why I believe it is necessary to keep the girl reader clearly in sight when considering the novels written for her, and discussed the methodology by which I hope to keep her there, it is necessary to establish the feminist theoretical and conceptual lens through which I view the missing discourse of her desire and the ways in which the novels I discuss help either to suppress, or to foster, such a discourse.

I have discussed this missing discourse of girls’ desire, the acute tension between pleasure and danger in relation to girls’ desire, and the related idea that it is girls who bear the responsibility for controlling and restraining the supposedly irrepressible sexual desires of boys. From my feminist perspective, these things are all deeply problematic, with consequences that are seldom, if ever, to the benefit of girls, or of the women they will become.

## Consequences and pleasure

Perhaps the easiest consequence for many adults to dismiss is a reduced likelihood that girls might experience pleasure in sex.<sup>11</sup> Although, as I have said, both research and informal observation suggest that many girls do experience sexual desire, it seems that straight girls who have sex are unlikely to have it either because they actually desire sex at the times they have it or because they desire the specific people with whom they have it. Emily A. Impett and Letitia A. Peplau (2003: 88) find that women “consent to sexual activity that they do not personally desire” more often than men do; among the 400 teenage girls that Thompson (1990: 352) interviewed about their sexual and romantic histories, it was only a “few rare” girls who referred to “their own bodies and feelings as primary justifications in sexual decision making”. Such lack of specific, focussed, present desire does not preclude the possibility of pleasure, but it does probably reduce it.

One reason why women are more likely to consent to sex that they do not particularly want is what Janet Holland et al. (1994: 23) describe as a socially-constructed “model of sexual behaviour for young women which can be described as passive femininity”, and which “has no concept of the autonomy of women’s bodies or of female sexual desire”. Tolman (2002b: 198) argues, similarly, that in a “patriarchal society, women’s sexuality is constructed not in terms of women’s own desires, needs, satisfaction, health or happiness, but [in]

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<sup>11</sup> This is, in fact, an outcome that many adults might welcome, in the belief that lack of pleasure might dissuade girls who have sex from having it again. I will discuss the flaws in the reasoning that underpins this belief later in this chapter.

the service of men's needs". In subsequent chapters of this thesis I will explore a variety of ways and contexts in which the sexually passive femininity discussed by Tolman (2002b: 198) and Holland et al. (1994: 23) has been represented in YA fiction. In my opinion, such sexually passive femininity is common among YA heroines because it is both pervasive and normative in Western culture. Certainly, it was a powerful presence in the sexual lives of the girls and young women studied by Holland et al. (1994: 30), who:

clearly indicated that they defined heterosexuality in terms of 'proper intercourse' which starts with penetration and ends when the male achieves his orgasm – with the men losing bodily control, but still in control. This male-centred heterosexuality requires that the woman also ought to have an orgasm to make it proper sex and to demonstrate his power. Faking orgasm is one way in which women use their bodies sexually in order to meet this aspect of social construction.

Reasons for faking orgasms described in research and popular sex advice writing, according to Virginia Braun et al. (2003: 257), include needing or wanting to protect men's egos or to maintain men's arousal and excitement, and feeling socially obligated, or seeing it as polite, to do so. In the Holland et al. (1994: 30) research, teenage girls are quoted as saying that they fake orgasms "just to make him happy", because "then he might hurry up and finish", because "everyone I know does that, you know", and because otherwise "they go, 'you didn't come, did you?' and if you say, 'no',... they sort of feel like they're so – not a man, you know". Such reasons reflect a passive femininity in which sex is defined by men's physical and social expectations, and female pleasure is subordinated to these expectations.

The passive femininity expected of and performed by most sexually active

teenage girls is evident not only in what they do sexually, but also in how they speak about sex. Among the girls interviewed by Thompson (1990) and Tolman (2002a), there is a remarkable consistency in the language they use to distance themselves from their own sexual actions, and in Chapters Four and Five of this thesis I will discuss examples of how sexually passive heroines in YA fiction use similar tricks of language to distance themselves from their own sexual actions.

On the basis of her research, Thompson (1990: 343) observes:

Asked to describe the circumstances of first coitus, many girls blink and freeze, dropping predicates and leaving passive sentences dangling as if under a posthypnotic suggestion to suppress. 'It was something that just happened,' they say finally....

One of the girls Thompson (1990: 343) interviewed offered, for example: "I tell you, I don't know why or how I did it. Maybe I just did it unconsciously". Another said (in Thompson 1990: 345): "It was just like – psssst, one minute here, the next minute it was there. It happened. That was it." Tolman's (2002a: 2) research produced similarly passive "it just happened" stories. One girl told her (in Tolman 2002a: 67): "It's not something that you really think about ... it just happened, I don't know why I did it, just, I did it. Well, I was touchin' him, it was just somethin' that happened. It's not like I had thought about it ahead of time, like I wanna do this." Another, similarly, explained (in Tolman 2002a: 1-2):

The first time I ever had sex, it was something that I least expected it. I didn't actually go to his house and expect something to happen, because it, he was kissing me, and I felt like I wasn't there, it was like my body just went limp. It was like, I had went out with him for a year, and I was like wow, and um, he was just kissing me, and I was like, and then all of a sudden like, just, like my body just went limp, and then everything just happened. To me, I feel like I didn't notice anything.

In Thompson's (1990: 350, 351) research, roughly three quarters of the girls

performed a sexually passive femininity and experienced first-time intercourse as painful and/or boring, and without pleasure. About a quarter, however, “tell a totally different story of sexual curiosity, exploration, and pleasure”. These “pleasure narrators describe taking sexual initiative; satisfying their own sexual curiosity; instigating petting and coital relations”. They plan for more pleasurable sex in the future (Thompson 1990: 357). Thompson (1990: 355, 356) finds that they “hold out for kisses, foreplay, oral sex, passion”; they “assume they have a right to orgasm, and they know it’s possible”. Louisa Allen (2012: 462-463) argues that discourses of pleasure that view such pleasure narrators as models of sexual subjectivity risk implying a “pleasure imperative” in which pleasure slips from “legitimate possibility” to “regulatory” expectation, and lack of pleasure implies a personal or relationship failing. It is true that Thompson’s pleasure narrators take responsibility for their own pleasure, but it would be a mistake to interpret this as reflecting a ‘pleasure imperative’ in which the passively feminine girls Thompson spoke to are personally at fault. It is not because of personal, but because of social and cultural, failing that the majority of girls cannot see pleasurable sex as a ‘legitimate possibility’, that they perform their femininity as passivity, and that they do not take responsibility for their own pleasure.

Tolman (2002b: 206) sees a link between the finding that over a third of adult women, according to Edward O. Laumann et al., experience little sexual desire and/or arousal, and the prevalence of sex education that teaches girls “nothing about alternative forms of sexual expression, ways to have sexual pleasure that are safe, or even basic knowledge about their bodies and sexuality”. Holland et al.

(1994: 24) find, furthermore, that a “modest, feminine reputation requires a young woman to construct a disembodied sexuality”, detached from her sensuality and alienated from her body, so that she is, for example, unaware of or able to ignore her own desires in order to subordinate them to the desires of boys or men. Most girls are both ignorant about sex and disconnected from their own bodies. Two differences between the passively feminine girls and Thompson’s ‘pleasure narrators’ that are thus fundamental are that, Thompson (1990: 351, 355; my italics) observes, the pleasure narrators “describe *several sources and forms of precoital knowledge and experience*”, and they “are desirous.... They understand that they have a right to consult their own desire in deciding whether or not to have sex”. Girls who take pleasure in sex read their bodies informed by a discourse of desire, and they *know* something about sex: cognitively, kinaesthetically, and affectively, to use the axes discussed in Chapter One. Girls whose sexual experiences are not pleasurable reveal the gap between kinaesthetic and affective knowledge, on the one hand, and cognition, on the other; Thompson (1990: 344) finds that they tend to “report some instruction in the biology of intercourse”, but “say they knew but they didn’t really know” what they were doing.

Such girls also reveal how the missing discourse of desire implies, and is lived as, a discourse of compulsorily missing desire. According to Tolman (2002a: 2), the girl whose body “went limp, and then everything just happened”, and who felt like she “didn’t notice anything” offered her story “as one of sexual pleasure”. Tolman (2002a: 2) suggests that this is because “‘it just happened’ is a story about desire” and “about the necessity for girls to cover their desire. It is also a

story that covers over active choice, agency, and responsibility, which serves to ‘disappear’ desire, in the telling and in the living”. Tamsin Wilton (2004: 43) argues that “desire is produced in the intersections between the social, the cultural and the subjective/psychological”. If most girls who have sex do not desire it or take pleasure in it; do not value their own pleasure; see sex as something that emerges from, and services, only the irrepressible sexual desires of boys and men, the failure is not theirs, subjective and psychological, but a social and cultural one: the failure to provide either adequate and various sources of cognitive, kinaesthetic and affective knowledge about sex and sexuality, or adequate and various sources of a discourse of teenage female sexual desire.

### **Consequences and danger**

I have suggested that a reduced likelihood of pleasure in sex is an easy thing for many adults to dismiss (in relation to teenage girls, if not to themselves, or to teenage boys). My own standpoint is that safe, consensual sexual pleasure is an enriching and valuable joy in its own right, and needs no further justification. I am, however, aware that the qualifiers ‘safe’ and ‘consensual’ hint at a host of problems surrounding girls’ pleasures that cannot be ignored. What of danger, the endemic obverse of pleasure in women’s sexuality? Are girls’ pleasures important enough to risk their sexual health and safety for? It is after all in large part from a protective instinct that adults prefer to keep sexual knowledge and information from teenagers, and particularly girls. Feminist rhetoric does not

change the facts that heterosexual transmission of some sexually transmitted infections (STIs) affects girls and women more than boys and men (Muehlenhard & Peterson 2005: 17; Shefer & Foster 2009: 268; Venkatraman et al. 2015: 53); that in ordinary life girls and women are more likely than boys and men to be raped or otherwise sexually assaulted (Acierno et al. 1997; Black et al. 2011: 1-2); that (cisgender) girls can get pregnant and (cisgender) boys cannot; and that there is a sexual double standard – in life (see Allen 2003; Moran & Lee 2014; Muehlenhard & Peterson 2005; Shefer & Foster 2009; Tolman 2002a; Van Zyl 2009) as in YA fiction (see Younger 2009; Trites 2000) – by which girls and women are judged and punished for sexual behaviour seen as acceptable, even admirable, in boys and men. Given these genuine dangers, it is reasonable to question whether teenage girls' sexual pleasure is a sensible or indeed desirable goal.

During Tamara Shefer and Don Foster's focus-group research (2009: 275), one woman in a discussion of why women do not challenge male-centred ideas of heterosex explained: "He would think of you as a wild person ... if you suggest or tell him that you are not satisfied ... then he will think you're wild, a nymphet". When we question whether their pleasure endangers girls, we implicitly assume that a girl who knows that sex can be pleasurable and values her own pleasure is more likely to have sex, and to have sex earlier and with more people, and perhaps to have more dangerous – wilder – kinds of sex: in other words, that she is something of a 'wild person', a 'nymphet'. Conversely, we assume that a girl who does not value her own pleasure is less likely to have sex, or is likely to have

sex later, and to have safer – more prudent, modest – kinds of sex: that she will be what is considered a good girl.

Even if the gendered and judgemental nature of good girl and wild girl characterizations does not give pause – as I believe it should – the assumptions behind these characterizations rest on a model of sexual decision-making that implies that pleasure is the only factor in both ‘good’ and ‘wild’ girls’ decisions about sex, and that girls who value their pleasure will thus probably make the rational choice to seek it through sex, while girls who do not value their pleasure will probably make the rational choice to avoid sex because it has nothing to offer them. Arousal and desire are, however, as Lynne Hillier et al. (1998: 15) point out, not rational things; they may appear in the absence of a rational hope of pleasure, or remain wanting despite one. Hillier et al. (1998: 25) observe, furthermore, that the decision to have sex is, in any case, often a rationalized rather than a rational one. As Allen (2012: 464) states, it is often taken for a variety of “reasons other than personal pleasure”: what sex has to offer includes not only pleasure, but anything from a child, sleep, security or a sense of normality to an opportunity to feel or cause pain, or to *give* pleasure. A rational, single-focus model of sexual decision-making does not stand up to scrutiny. Not surprisingly, then, empirical evidence for an idea based on such a model, that discourses of female desire and pleasure lead to earlier or less safe sex, is lacking.

Also lacking is evidence that sex-negative discourses – discourses that, in Gayle Rubin’s (1992: 278) words “consider sex to be a dangerous, destructive, negative

force” and that always treat it “with suspicion” – lead to safer sex. Medical and policy research suggests, instead, that the sex-negative discourse of abstinence-only sex education fails not only to increase rates of abstinence, but also to significantly delay the start of sexual activity, to reduce the number of sexual partners, or to reduce rates of unprotected sex and risks of pregnancy or STI infection (Kohler et al. 2008: 349, 350; Trenholm et al. 2007: 59; Underhill et al. 2007: 6, 7-8). Similarly, the research of Melina M. Bersamin et al. (2005) on the sex-negative culture of chastity has found that formal, public virginity pledges – intended to prevent what is seen in this culture as the sin of premarital sex – fail to reduce the likelihood of teenage intercourse, oral sex or genital touching. And Hannah Brückner and Peter Bearman’s (2005: 277) study finds that:

although pledgers experience sexual debut later than others, most of them will eventually engage in premarital sex. Those who do report lower frequency of condom use at first intercourse. Those who do not are more likely to substitute oral and/or anal sex for vaginal sex.

Despite the risks associated with oral and, particularly, anal sex, teenagers who pledge chastity are less likely than other teenagers to be tested for STIs (Brückner & Bearman 2005: 277). At best, sex-negative discourses appear to make little difference to the safety of the sex that teenagers have. At worst, they may actually increase sexual risks.

It is thus worrying that in YA writing puritanical attitudes to sex are, as Michael Cart (2010: 3025) rightly says, part of the tradition. Roberta Trites (2000: 95) shows that most “YA novels about teenage sexuality have at best a conflicting ideology and at worst a repressive” one; she provides ample supporting

evidence, and her argument is further supported, in my readings, by most of the novels discussed in this thesis. Sex in YA writing is, furthermore, repeatedly portrayed from pleasure-denying perspectives, as, Beth Younger (2009: 39) writes, “painful, dangerous, and unfulfilling for women”. Particularly, Younger (2009: 88) correctly points out, stories frequently imply “that sex for the sake of pleasure, not bolstered by a ‘love’ relationship, is explicitly wrong”. Girls seen as wild girls are frequently punished either for giving in to their desires or simply for having sexual desires. As I will show in subsequent chapters, some of the punishments for desire experienced by YA heroines include debilitating shame and loss of identity, as well as, in South African writing, brutal physical violence. Lydia Kokkola (2013: 54, 48), in addition, describes loneliness and a sense of loss because of relationships damaged by sex as “ubiquitous”, while sexuality is so commonly punished through pregnancy that she refers to conceiving during first-time sex as a “trope”.<sup>12</sup> Younger (2009: 23, 34, 31), similarly, sees what she calls “pregnancy-problem novels” as so common that she identifies them as a subgenre of YA fiction. In these novels, she says, giving in to desire is “the ultimate failure for a young woman”, and “unplanned pregnancy functions as a kind of embodied scarlet letter that serves as a warning to others”.

Contrary to common assumptions about distinctions between girls seen as wild and girls seen as good, Fine (1988: 48) suggests that passively feminine girls “who lack a sense of social or sexual entitlement” are “disproportionately at risk for pregnancy and dropping out” of school. This may be because, as Holland et al.

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<sup>12</sup> This trope is evident in two of the novels analyzed in this thesis, *Army of the Lost* (Herne 2013) and *Breaking Dawn* (Meyer 2008), although in the latter case, I argue, pregnancy represents a reward rather than a punishment.

(1994: 23) show, passive femininity “makes it difficult for young women to practise safer sex”: it positions active responsibility for contraception as unfeminine, and with its subordination of female desire and pleasure it gives girls no rehearsal for making sexual demands. It has, in fact, been exposed as life-threatening in multiple South African studies that, in Shefer and Foster’s (2009: 268) view, have highlighted the roles of “male power, women’s inability to assert their needs, and the way in which men’s sexuality is privileged in decisions regarding condoms”. The difficulties created by passive femininity are exacerbated by the sexual double standard. While condoms can be a sort of badge of honour for boys, girls who carry condoms with them risk losing their good reputations (Hillier et al. 1998: 19; Holland et al. 1991: 139), which Hillier et al. (1998: 26) correctly note can mean not only having to endure labels such as ‘slut’, ‘tart’, ‘slag’ or ‘whore’, but also suffering “sexual harassment, loss of friends, feeling dirty, and general alienation”, as well as unwanted attention from boys who think they are promiscuous (Hillier et al. 1998: 20). As an Australian teenager put it in a discussion group during the Hillier et al. (1998: 20) research: “when you carry a condom all the boys think you want it”. With the double standard, passive femininity thus strongly increases girls’ risks of pregnancy and STI infection.

In Thompson’s (1990: 357) study, the pleasure narrators – knowledgeable, desirous and proactive – frequently “obtained contraception before first intercourse” and subsequently saw medical professionals in order to plan for safer sex in future. All waited until they felt desire before first having sex (Thompson 1990: 355). The discourse of female desire that informed these girls’

hopes and plans for pleasure thus not only led to safer sex but also delayed their first experiences of intercourse. By contrast, the passively feminine girls whose first experiences of sex were unpleasurable did not anticipate sex ('it just happened'), and as a result, they did not prepare for it by acquiring contraception. Many of these disappointed girls decided not to have sex again, until after a time it once again 'just happened'; Thompson (1990: 350) found that:

many girls are stunned by sex several times before they realize that they are very likely to have sex again, and prepare for that eventuality by obtaining contraception. Even girls who have been pregnant, or had children, may believe that they will not have sex again until the time is, at last, right.

Since female desire is antithetical to passive femininity, it appears that, as Fine (1988: 49) suggests, "sexual responsibility may actually be retarded without a discourse of desire".

Sexual coercion, however, is legitimized by a discourse of overwhelming, uncontrollable male desire. Rich (1980: 645-646) argues that "the law of male sex-right to women" is rooted in this discourse, because it teaches both girls and boys that the "adolescent male sex drive ... once triggered cannot take responsibility for itself or take no for an answer". If girls believe this, they may also, as Impett and Peplau (2003: 91) suggest:

believe that it is useless or unreasonable to refuse a man's sexual overture (Gilbert & Walker, 1999). Across a number of studies, a quarter to a third of women reported engaging in sexual intercourse because they thought that the man was too aroused to stop (e.g., Koss & Oros, 1982; Miller & Marshall, 1987).

Discourses of uncontrollable male desire, furthermore, foster a climate of

constant fear, and a relational environment of actual danger, among girls led to expect – and even excuse – rape from any boy or man felt to have been pushed too far. They also teach boys that there is a point beyond which they cannot – *and thus legitimately need not try to* – control their sexuality.

Within such discourses, Breanne Fahs (2010: 121; original italics) argues crucially, rape “loses its impact as a *violent act*” and becomes “a mere extension of the male urge for sex”. The locus of danger shifts from rape to sex, and the responsibility for preventing rape – like the responsibility for controlling teenage sex – becomes that of the girl, who must avoid arousing a boy’s uncontrollable desires. This may be very nearly impossible, however, within a discourse of “supersonic and imperious” (see Fahs 2010: 130) male desire. One of Shefer and Foster’s (2009: 272) research subjects stated: “I am a guy. I have biological needs. I need ... to be satisfied. If a woman comes walking past here now, and just by the look of [her] she arouses me and I want to be satisfied by her, then I’ll go for her ... I’ll go for her ... to satisfy me”. From such a perspective, a girl might arouse a boy or man’s desire, in all its supersonic imperiousness, just by ‘walking past’. As Holland et al. (1994: 23) very rightly point out, women are held responsible for male sexuality “without being able to control it”: this is a very “unsafe sexual strategy”.

At the same time, passive femininity, and the disembodied sexuality that Holland et al. (1994: 24) show resists female desire and is required of what are seen as good, feminine girls, make it natural for girls to surrender control of their own sexuality to others. Tolman (2002a: 21) argues:

When a girl does not know what her own feelings are, when she disconnects the apprehending psychic part of herself from what is happening in her own body, she then becomes especially vulnerable to the power of others' feelings as well as to what others say she does and does not want or feel.

In other words, compulsorily missing desire, as Tolman (2002b: 202) argues, “can leave girls vulnerable to the needs and narratives of boys with whom they desire relationships” – or, I would add, of men whom they regard as authority figures.

This is a social problem, because compulsorily missing desire, like passive femininity and disembodied sexuality, is a function of discourse, not nature. But most of the girls interviewed by Tolman (2002a: 188) perceived the tension between their embodied sexual desires and the “physical, social, material, and psychological dangers associated with their sexuality” as a personal, individual problem. All – even those few who recognized the problem as a social one – tried to develop “individualized solutions, which [were] neither answers nor routes to changing the social circumstances that [produced their] dilemmas in the first place”. This is not surprising: Rubin (1992: 276) points out, correctly, that medicine, psychiatry and psychology all “classify sex as the property of individuals”. But this classification obscures the fact that the dangers of sex for girls are tied to structural and institutional discourses, and that the sexual victimization and exploitation of teenage girls are consequences of gender inequity.<sup>13</sup> Far from being a purely individual property or dilemma, sex is

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<sup>13</sup> A large body of research has established that problems related to gender inequity are complicated and aggravated by intersections with inequities of class and race (see for example Attwood 2006; Bay-Cheng 2003; Boonzaier 2005; Fine

actually highly socially inflected: so much so that, as Rubin (1992: 293) argues, it can become “a vector of oppression”.

Sexual oppression poses serious mental and sexual health risks. A panel of experts on sexual health convened by the World Health Organization and the World Association of Sexology offers a working definition of sexual health as:

a state of physical, emotional, mental and social well-being in relation to sexuality; it is not merely the absence of disease, dysfunction or infirmity. Sexual health requires a positive and respectful approach to sexuality and sexual relationships, as well as the possibility of having pleasurable and safe sexual experiences, free of coercion, discrimination and violence. (World Health Organization 2006: 5)

Discourses that negate or condemn girls’ felt desires and pleasures while exalting those of boys; that disconnect girls from their own bodies and subject them to the expectations of boys’ bodies and to boys’ social expectations; that permeate their lives with constant fear and actual danger; that hold them responsible for things that they cannot control; that legitimize judging them for trying to approach sex safely and responsibly; and that foster a culture of sexual coercion, all powerfully combat that ‘state of physical, emotional, mental and social well-being’ defined above as sexual health. Fine (1988: 35) observes that teenage girls assume “a dual consciousness – at once taken with the excitement of actual/anticipated sexuality and consumed with anxiety and worry”. Thompson (1990: 350) notes that the “pain, fear, and disappointment that most

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1988; Garcia 2009; Hasinoff 2009; Negra 2009; Steyn & Van Zyl 2009; Pattman & Bhana 2009; Shefer & Foster 2009; Tolman 2002a). An analysis of these intersections is beyond the scope of this chapter, but my discussion of gender inequity should be understood as a focussed examination of only one aspect of a larger, more complex problem.

girls reported” in her study undercut their “sense of well-being and hope and generated depression” and memory loss. And Tolman (2002a: 77-78) demonstrates that:

girls who are not able to sense the presence or absence of their own sexual desire risk becoming dissociated from their own experience and from reality, thereby impairing their psychological integrity and their understanding of what is happening in the world around them.

Girls’ sexuality is not the only, or necessarily the most important, aspect of their lives. But it does not exist in isolation from all other aspects of their being. If we wish them to be coherent, self-aware agents in their own lives, their sexual pleasures and desires cannot be disengaged from their other pleasures and desires, or from their experiences, thoughts, feelings and needs. Their pleasures and desires do not conduce to danger. Instead, it is discourses that deny these pleasures and desires that are among the things that, first, place them at risk and, then, withhold from them any power to protect themselves from such risk. The catastrophic irony of overdetermining and emphasizing exclusively the dangers of sexuality for girls is thus that it has led to a negation of their sexual desires and pleasures that is itself dangerous. To trouble their pleasures and desires is to trouble teenage girls themselves.

## **THE WRONG GENDER FOR DESIRE**

## ***Girl Re-Membered***

*When I was in high school, my close friends and I thought about sex quite a lot. This was something of an intellectual challenge because, inexperienced as we were, sex was more or less unimaginable, and so, in the literal sense of the word, unthinkable. Even in my wildest fantasies, what I saw was settings and opening scenes, never the detail or action of any form of consummation. My mind stopped short before the image of another body in any truly intimate contact with mine, because I lacked the imagination to conceive what such contact might be like. But – critically – I could desire what I could not imagine. To desire was my first, and foundational, sexual act.*

*We were Christian girls, morally opposed to sex outside of marriage and sincerely committed to living according to our morals. I was not aware of what has been called the culture of chastity – as Breanne Fahs (2010: 116) puts it, a culture of “Ritualized Abstinence” in the form of “purity balls, chastity clubs, and other public declarations of abstinence and asexuality” – but our culture was a chaste one. At my church youth group I had been taught some basic practices considered necessary to support my chastity: I was to avoid being alone in a car with a boy at night, because the opportunity provided by this rare privacy risked being too tempting; and if I acquired a boyfriend, we were to end the relationship if we became too close, because a strong emotional bond would open us to the risks of desiring a physical bond, and of judgement sufficiently clouded for it to seem acceptable to fulfil this desire. (I find myself, now, unable to decide whether the first of these tips is the more remarkable, for the quite delightful silliness of its implied*

*assumption that sex is possible only at night, or the second, for the horrifying bleak inhumanity with which it prioritizes chastity over even nonsexual warmth and love and growth in socially and emotionally developing young people.)*

*To its credit, my church did screen a sex education film that stated that although sex outside marriage was wrong, if we did nevertheless choose to have sex we should use condoms because of the risk of HIV. The film also advised that if desire seemed irresistible, then what it referred to as “mutual masturbation” was a safer and wiser thing to do than sex. But it was unclear from the film whether mutual masturbation was something that two individuals did to themselves while sitting next to each other, or whether it was something that a couple did to each other; and the youth leaders told us after the film that, while its information was sound, some of its suggestions were a little beyond the line. So the usefulness of the film’s advice was limited.*

*Within such a cultural context, my friends and I knew what behaviour we believed was wrong, and for us to act in spite of this knowledge was, in a second sense of the word, unthinkable. But our desires, nevertheless, leaked out around the edges of our thoughts and conversations. There’s a tradition among older children and teenagers of using baseball as a source of sexual metaphors. Specifics may vary, but in my youth first base most commonly referred to kissing, second base was touching breasts, third base was mutual masturbation (I am now moderately confident that I know what this term means), and a home run meant a penis in a vagina – what we called sex. One of my friends, however, devised a set of bases more suited to our specific experiential and linguistic needs: first base referred to eye contact, second*

*was smiling, third was conversation, and a kiss was a home run. It seems to me now that these word games were a form of chastity play, and that our need for such metaphors reveals how our suppressed sexual desires were, inevitably, inscribed in this very play. We never tired of long discussions about which boys we would like to play out various scenarios with: in whose arms did we want to lie and watch the sunrise, who did we want to be our boyfriends, who did we want to kiss, who did we want to marry? (This last was a coded way of speaking not only about love and companionship and compatibility but also, very importantly, about sex.)*

*In retrospect, these games are interesting to me for what they reveal about the conditions and contexts in which we felt able to work around the restrictions of our chastity in order to fulfil our desires in fantasy: the closer and more loving the fantasized bond, the more physically intimate we allowed ourselves to imagine being. In trying to teach me that emotional closeness would open me to the risk of desiring sex, what my youth group had actually reinforced was a lesson that was more or less the opposite of what it had intended: that it was acceptable, or at least less unacceptable, for me to desire sex with someone I was emotionally close to.*

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*Outside my chaste inner circle, there was another friend with whom I bonded over our shared excited and eager anticipation of sex. Our conversations were a somewhat raunchier act of expectation and desire than the chastity play of my closest friends; a certain threshold was crossed because she sat behind me in English, and relied on me to explain the dirty jokes and innuendos that our teacher*

*routinely avoided discussing when we read Twelfth Night and Romeo and Juliet. After school I went straight on to university, and she left the country to travel to a series of far-flung places. I haven't seen her since. But the year after we left school, just as I was gradually beginning to be able to think of emerging from my cold culture of chastity, she sent me a postcard – a postcard! for the postman and anyone else to read! – from some exotic location or other. It said:*

*Bonnie!*

*SEX IS AS GOOD AS WE THOUGHT IT WOULD BE!!!*

*Tanya*

*I worried about the postman, but nothing – nothing – could diminish the pure shining joy of the message.*

## Chapter Three

### A Fugitive Celebration: Stephenie Meyer's Twilight Saga

In January 2010 the BBC reported that the five best-selling children's books in the UK in 2009 were all Twilight books, and that the series accounted for ten per cent of total UK children's book sales for that year (Harrison 2010: n.p.). By November 2012, *Forbes* reported that the Twilight films had earned \$2,5 billion at the box office; DVD sales and television screenings would inevitably add to that figure (Pomerantz 2012: n.p.). Furthermore, as Melissa A. Click et al. (2010c: 6) note, the films have staked "new territory in developing a female-oriented series into a full-blown media franchise". The Twilight series has, to a certain extent, reshaped the landscape of girls' books and film.

What is behind the extraordinary cultural and publishing success of Stephenie Meyer's Twilight books – *Twilight* (2005), *New Moon* (2006), *Eclipse* (2007) and *Breaking Dawn* (2008) – I would suggest, is desire. Twilight is a love story, and a story of desire. There are many love stories written for a young adult (YA) audience; there are not many stories of desire. Both popular and scholarly critics have commonly dismissed the representation of desire itself in the series, focussing instead on the circumstances and ways in which desire is, and is not, fulfilled. But to dismiss desire is to brush aside the very thing that, in my opinion, has resonated most powerfully with teenage girl fans of the novels. The extraordinary cultural impact of the series is, I think, a result of its rare

sympathetic foregrounding of its heroine's sexual desire. This cultural impact, and this sympathy with and foregrounding of desire, make *Twilight* both particularly significant within the YA field, and particularly relevant to this thesis. For these reasons, I consider the series in greater detail than I do other texts, in order to establish it as a base for comparison of the representations of desire in other YA texts.

The series tells the love story of Bella Swan, a human girl who is seventeen years old at the beginning of the story, and her vampire boyfriend Edward Cullen, who was born in 1901 and frozen at the physical age of seventeen when he became a vampire. Edward and Bella meet at school, fall in love, and marry shortly after Bella graduates from high school. They have sex for the first time on their honeymoon, and Bella becomes pregnant, Edward and most of the vampire world not having known that it would be possible for a human and a vampire to conceive. The foetus grows at an abnormal rate, and Edward strongly wishes Bella to terminate her pregnancy before it kills her. Bella, however, is thrilled at the thought of having Edward's child, and refuses. The hybrid baby does nearly kill Bella during its birth, but Edward saves Bella by changing her into a vampire, the thing she has most wanted since coming to know him. Their baby, Renesmee, is a charming and angelic little girl whom everybody adores, and she and her parents live happily ever after.

One important source of conflict in the series is Bella's best friend, Jacob, who loves Bella and who she is herself attracted to. Another is the fact that it is unavoidably dangerous for a human to live in the company of vampires. Edward

and his adoptive vampire family are unusual among vampires for the size and closeness of their community, and for choosing to hunt animals rather than to drink human blood, but the smell of Bella's blood is particularly appealing to Edward, and at first he is frightened that he will be unable to suppress his thirst for it. It soon becomes clear that his self-restraint, strengthened by his love for her, is equal to the task, but by this time Bella has begun to attract the attention of various other vampires, so that she is in constant danger until she is herself made a vampire.

A third source of conflict in the series is desire. Apart from being changed into a vampire, what Bella most passionately wants is sex with Edward. She does not wish to marry young, but, concerned for both his own and Bella's souls, Edward refuses any sexual activity beyond a few brief kisses until they are married.

### **Conservative patriarchal postfeminism**

From my feminist perspective, the Twilight series has much that is valuable to offer teenage girl readers. But to argue this is to fly in the face of a large body of feminist scholarship that has sharply criticised the series. Emphatically, much of this criticism is both valid and important. As Anna Silver (2010: 122) says, the novels' "gender ideology is ultimately and unapologetically patriarchal." Elana Levine (2010: 283) argues convincingly that the fact that the teenage heroine's "most forcefully asserted wish" is to end her human life so that she can spend eternity with her boyfriend as a vampire "takes the notion of female

empowerment out of the explicitly political and transforms it into the wholly personal. It bends the notion of feminist empowerment so that it becomes equivalent to feminine devotion.” In a similar vein, Hila Schachar (2011: 155) rightly states that the series takes a postfeminist approach:

which utilizes the rhetoric of women ‘having it all’ (happiness, true love, a loving partner, fulfillment, belonging, money, security, ‘power,’) with a deeply conservative politics that suggests ‘having it all’ actually means retreating back to traditional notions of femininity.

Silver (2010: 130, 132) points out that the anti-abortion message of *Breaking Dawn* (Meyer 2008) not only makes use of typical anti-abortion campaign diction and “fictionalizes the key anti-abortion argument that personhood occurs before birth” when it “grants the fetus consciousness and emotion”, but also “explicitly makes Bella’s pregnancy life-threatening”. The novel thus gives vivid life and emotional specificity to the strictest and most misogynist of anti-abortion positions, which opposes abortion even to save the life of the mother. Furthermore, as Ananya Mukherjea (2011: 73-74) rightly says of what she calls the series’s “abstinence ideology”:

The major religious and political groups that backed George W. Bush’s abstinence education policy also strive to censor all other discussion about teenage sexuality, to vilify homosexuality and other religious groups, and to subvert and contain the role of women in society. Contemporary abstinence culture is inextricably enmeshed with these other sociopolitical positions, and the resultant politic is insupportably intolerant and dangerous in its disinformation.

There is thus, unquestionably, much for a feminist to dislike in the *Twilight* novels, and there is certainly much in their postfeminism, their politics, and their gender characterizations that deeply concerns me. But while I recognize and am

troubled by the problems identified by scholars such as Silver (2010), Levine (2010), Schachar (2011) and Mukherjea (2011), my reading of the series is in opposition to much of the feminist criticism of it. As Heather Anastasiu (2011: 53) states, discussions of what is problematic in the series are “valuable and necessary, but the critical community, sometimes too quickly, condemns the entirety of the material, neglecting to observe the possible positive psychological implications of the text alongside the negative.” Despite my many very genuine concerns about the series, as a feminist I am most uncomfortable with condemning a work that has resonated so strongly with so large an audience of girls and women, and as a scholar of YA literature I find the series truly remarkable for its treatment of its heroine’s sexual desire. This is an aspect of the novels that has frequently been either ignored or dismissed – even criticized – as mere titillation. In an influential popular article, Christine Seifert (2008: n.p.), an Associate Professor at Westminster College in Salt Lake City, argues that *Twilight* introduces the new sub-genre of “abstinence porn: sensational, erotic, and titillating”, existing to eroticize chastity culture. I hope to show that ‘abstinence porn’ readings are inadequate to explain all that the series does with Bella’s desire, privileging what may be supposed to be Meyer’s intentions with it over what readers might actually make of it. Beyond the merely inadequate, there is, furthermore, a quantity of feminist criticism that appears, disquietingly, to be grounded in misreading so marked as to appear at times wilful. The prevalence of both inadequate and perverse feminist *Twilight* scholarship, I believe, justifies my resistance to the main body of feminist criticism of the series.

## Troubling scholarship

Carol Siegel's (2011) 'The *Twilight* of Sexual Liberation: Undead Abstinence Ideology' provides several examples of what appears to be wilful misreading. Siegel (2011: 274) claims that what the *Twilight* (2008) film:

actually shows us is a girl who must wait until the much older lover who is grooming her to be his sexual object finds her ripe and ready. So although she seems on the right track, Christine Seifert is wrong in that this is not something new, not 'abstinence porn' at all, but something quite familiar dressed up in abstinent vampire drag. *Twilight* is pedophilic porn. It is aimed not at the adult who desires a barely pubescent girl, but at the little girl herself (as a member of the target 'tween audience).

There is simply no textual foundation for this reading in either the novels or the film Siegel references. Siegel (2011: 262) provides no support for her odd assertion that the target audience of the series, rather than the YA market of teenagers, is "the 'tween audience (9-12)". And, unpleasant as many readers – myself included – might find the idea of a romantic relationship between a 104-year-old man<sup>14</sup> and a teenage girl, there is no question of paedophilia. Bella is at no point in the series "barely pubescent": she is seventeen, a year past the legal age of consent in her home state of Washington, when the first book opens and she and Edward meet<sup>15</sup>, and eighteen on their honeymoon, when they first expand their sexual relationship beyond kissing. The only point that Siegel (2011: 267) makes that could have supported her reading is that Bella "is 5'4" with an underdeveloped body" – but there is, once again, no textual foundation

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<sup>14</sup> Siegel (2011: 267) states incorrectly that Edward is ninety years old.

<sup>15</sup> Siegel frequently discusses the *Twilight* (2008) film and novel interchangeably but her primary focus is on the film, so that although my focus is on the novel, it is worth noting that Kristen Stewart, who plays Bella in the film, was herself seventeen when shooting began.

for the claim that Bella's body is underdeveloped. Instead, what we know about her body is that she has an extremely regular menstrual cycle (Meyer 2008: 48), that she has "always been slender, but soft somehow, obviously not an athlete" (Meyer 2005: 12), that she weighs 110 pounds (Meyer 2005: 105), and that she is, indeed, five foot four inches tall (Meyer 2005: 20). This gives her a body mass index that the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (n.d.: n.p.) classify as "healthy" for her age.<sup>16</sup>

Siegel's further (2011: 270) claim that Edward beats Bella on their honeymoon is as unfounded as her claim that the series is paedophilic pornography. When Bella wakes up after having sex for the first time she is covered in bruises because of her close and unrestrained physical contact with Edward, whose vampire flesh has been very well established as being as hard as stone (see for example Meyer 2005: 188, 302, 303, 343, 397; Meyer 2006: 54, 542; Meyer 2007: 39, 51, 216, Meyer 2008: 11). Siegel's (2011: 270) evidence that these bruises imply "a beating" is that:

the bruising and pain are concentrated on her arms and legs, abdomen and back, there is almost no mention of any pain or injury to her vagina or even to her groin. It almost seems as if Meyer herself does not know the mechanics of intercourse. Bella seems to be suffering from a beating rather than a rape<sup>17</sup>, and there is no explanation of why Edward felt it necessary to hit her so much except that he lost control of his deep underlying desire to kill her.

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<sup>16</sup> In the *Twilight* (2008) film, Kristen Stewart has a slim but unremarkable teenage body.

<sup>17</sup> It is unclear why Siegel should raise the question of rape. As I will show, nothing either before or after the event suggests anything but Bella's passionate desire and enthusiastic consent, carefully considered and repeatedly and explicitly expressed.

In fact, there is no explanation of why Edward feels it necessary to hit Bella so much because Edward does not, in fact, hit her at all: Bella's bruising is entirely consistent with a night of embracing and being embraced by, and moving with and against, a body of stone. Furthermore, the concentration of bruising and pain on the limbs, abdomen and back that Siegel finds so suspicious is Siegel's own invention. Bella first notices the bruises on her arm (Meyer 2008: 35), because that is the first part of herself that she sees when she wakes up the morning after having had sex. When she subsequently looks in a mirror, she says: "There was a faint shadow across one of my cheekbones, and my lips were a little swollen, but other than that, my face was fine. The rest of me was decorated with patches of blue and purple" (Meyer 2008: 37). There is no mention, at any point in the series, of either vaginas or groins. It is thus surely reasonable to understand Bella's groin to be included in 'the rest' of her, and to read the failure to mention pain specifically in her vagina as reflective of the consistent modesty, even coyness, of the series, rather than as implying that Bella does not feel any vaginal pain.

Siegel's work is certainly the most egregious example I have found of the tendency in Twilight scholarship to ignore textual fact and/or to misread it, but it is in no way unique. The idea that Edward beats Bella, for example, is reaffirmed by Danielle N. Borgia (2014: 162) when she argues that "Edward's physical threat to Bella materializes in the severe bruising on her body after their wedding night, in the pattern of partners who batter and then immediately initiate intercourse with their lovers." The determination of some feminist scholars to convict Edward of domestic violence is so strong that, ironically, it

leads Borgia to ignore the abusive manipulation and forceful – arguably violent – carnality of Jacob. By threatening to kill himself in battle (without in fact intending to do so) if Bella does not give him physical proof that she cares about him, Jacob manipulates Bella into kissing him (Meyer 2007: 523-526, 532). She allows the kiss, but – unlike when she is with Edward – her consent is far from enthusiastic: she keeps her “fingers curled into fists at [her] sides” (Meyer 2007: 526) and her mouth accepts his passively, at which he becomes angry (Meyer 2007: 526) and his initial roughness becomes still more forceful: “One hand moved to the nape of my neck, twisting into a fist around the roots of my hair. The other hand grabbed roughly at my shoulder, shaking me, then dragging me to him.... All the while his lips ... tried to force a response out of mine” (Meyer 2007: 526). Yet Borgia (2014: 169) contends that one of the reasons Bella finds Jacob less attractive than Edward is that Jacob’s “respectful treatment of her ... makes him less domineering, and therefore less virile, in her eyes.”

The tendency to such apparently wilful misreading of *Twilight* is, in fact, widespread, and it is in some ways more pernicious in cases where it is enmeshed with scholarship that is undeniably sound. For example, Lydia Kokkola’s (2011) reading of the series provides a particularly illuminating and insightful contextualization within, and reading of the accommodations the YA series makes to, the adult romance genre. But it is difficult to reconcile Kokkola’s (2011: 173) argument that Bella’s unplanned pregnancy is a punishment for her desire<sup>18</sup>, or her (2011: 176) suggestion that Meyer’s goal might have been “to

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<sup>18</sup> Carrie Anne Platt (2010: 76), similarly, characterizes Bella’s pregnancy as a “punishment of young female sexuality”.

produce a text that would terrify her young readers about the horrors of pregnancy” and birth with the tremendous joy that Bella feels about her pregnancy.

Bella is initially “stunned”, “shocked” and “bewildered” (Meyer 2008: 49): she has a visibly pregnant belly less than a month after having sex not only for the first time but also with someone thought to be sterile, and her shock appears to have more to do with her understandable bewilderment than with the horror of a God-like author’s punishment. In fact, it is essential for the purposes of Meyer’s anti-abortion rhetoric that the baby be seen as anything but a punishment, the pregnancy anything but a horror. Instead, this rhetoric requires the baby to be a lovable and beloved little person, which is what it almost immediately becomes when, Bella says: “What happened to change everything was that a soft little nudge bumped my hand – from inside my body” (Meyer 2008: 49). Bella’s bewilderment changes to wonder (Meyer 2008: 49), and she marvels over the imagined vision of a beautiful baby with eyes like Edward’s in her arms (Meyer 2008: 51). Within an hour of discovering that she is pregnant, she thinks:

It was funny how abruptly and entirely necessary this vision had become. From that first little touch, the whole world had shifted. Where before there was just one thing I could not live without, now there were two. There was no division – my love was not split between them now; it wasn’t like that. It was more like my heart had grown, swollen up to twice its size in that moment. (Meyer 2008: 51)

She begins talking to the baby (Meyer 2008: 51), and thinks of it as a person, “Someone” (Meyer 2008: 51). Edward promises her, “We’re going to get that thing out before it can hurt any part of you” (Meyer 2008: 52), and her knees

become wobbly not only with shock at the thought of terminating her baby but also with outrage because, she thinks, “Edward just called my little nudger a *thing*” (Meyer 2008: 52). Far from a punishment for desire, for Bella this baby is clearly a reward. Her brief pregnancy proves to be extremely difficult and dangerous, but it is evident that she experiences it as a joy, rather than a horror, and it produces a beautiful (Meyer 2008: 169), intelligent (Meyer 2008: 165, 169) child who “already sleeps through the night” at three days old (Meyer 2008: 165) and is so “irresistible” that something about her draws “everyone to her” and makes them “willing even to pledge their lives in her defense” (Meyer 2008: 229).

There are, of course, more balanced readings of problems such as those surrounding gender-based violence in the series. Renae Franiuk and Samantha Scherr (2013: 24, 15), for example, argue convincingly that “contemporary vampire fiction [including *Twilight*] reinforces gender stereotypes and roles, favorably portrays male suitors with characteristics that are predictive of relationship violence, and eroticizes sexual violence”, and that:

the patriarchal messages from contemporary vampire fiction are consistent with messages in other genres. Therefore, contemporary vampire fiction may be adding to messages in other media (e.g., romance novels) that construct a reality that condones violence against women.

Franiuk and Scherr (2013) thus recognize the dangers inherent in Meyer’s portrayal of Edward’s undeniably controlling behaviour and Bella’s glamorized and eroticized bruises, but they stop short of reading in physical abuse that is not

present in the fictional situation on the basis of behaviour that would be predictive of such abuse in real life.

But despite the existence of careful scholarship such as that of Franiuk and Scherr (2013), textually unsupported interpretations like those of Kokkola (2011), Siegel (2011), Platt (2010) and Borgia (2014) abound in feminist Twilight scholarship. Such readings often appear to be grounded in contempt for the series's teenage girl fans. Click et al. (2010c: 6) present convincing evidence that widespread contempt for Twilight fans in the popular media is strongly gendered. They point out that:

the mainstream press has belittled the reactions of girls and women to the Twilight series and the actors who play their favorite characters, frequently using Victorian era gendered words like 'fever,' 'madness,' 'hysteria,' and 'obsession' to describe Twiligheters. *The New York Times* described *Twilight* fans as 'on the rabid side' (Rafferty, 2008, para. 2), and *Entertainment Weekly* reported that an appearance by Robert Pattinson sent 'thousands of besotted girls into fits of red-faced screaming' (Valby, 2008, para. 2). *The Boston Globe* suggested that fans' interest in the films' stars is 'enthusiasm bordering on hysteria' (Gorov, 2009, para. 5).

Importantly, Click et al. (2010c: 6) point out that such "reports of girls and women seemingly out of their minds and out of control disparage female pleasures and curtail serious explorations of the strong appeal of the series."

Scholarly contempt for fans of the series, I would argue, similarly curtails serious consideration of the series and its appeal, and disparages not only female pleasures but also (teenage) female intellectual powers. Kokkola (2011: 166), for example, does not scruple to reveal her assumptions about these fans in an

argument such as the following:

The disparity between Bella and Edward's claims that they are an untraditional couple and the very traditional place of marriage in the resolution of their sexual tension is such that only very unsophisticated readers, possibly the target audience of these novels, will fail to notice the author's coerciveness.

Siegel's (2011: 270) contempt for the series (and, implicitly, its readers) is evident in the sarcasm of her suggestion that it "almost seems as if Meyer herself does not know the mechanics of intercourse".

Siegel's (2011: 274) contempt for Twilight fans is, furthermore, implicit in her assumption that these girl readers are unable to resist the problematic messages of the series: she argues unequivocally that Twilight "seduces" the girl it is aimed at. And Borgia (2014:158), similarly, states without qualification that the:

extreme effect that Edward has on Bella, his unrelenting manipulation of it, and most of all her thrill at surrendering to these feelings without thinking through the consequences, guide the reader to a similar surrender to the pleasure of uncritically absorbing the ideas of others through the rapid consumption of the printed words on the page.

Borgia (2014: 160) writes also of Twilight fans' "unconscious absorption of its glamorization of Bella's submission to Edward". And scholarly contempt for – or, at the very least, doubt of – the abilities of teenage girl fans to read critically and to resist ideological subjectification is reflected in the titles of monologues such as Natalie Wilson's (2011) *Seduced by Twilight: The Allure and the Contradictory Messages of the Popular Saga*, and essay collections such as the Click et al. (2010a) *Bitten by Twilight: Youth Culture, Media, & the Vampire Franchise* or Maggie Parke and Natalie Wilson's (2011) *Theorizing Twilight: Critical Essays on*

*What's at Stake in a Post-Vampire World*. The authors and editors of these books do not necessarily themselves share a dismissive contempt for Twilight fans; Wilson (2011: 2) defends them against charges of being “the dribbling, insipid, Edward addicts they are often made out to be”, and Click et al. (2010b: ix) describe themselves as fans. But the emphasis on danger and lack of choice or control in title keywords such as ‘seduced’, ‘allure’ and ‘bitten’, and the threat implicit in questions of ‘what’s at stake’, reflect, at least, a recognition of prevalent attitudes towards the series and its girl readers.

But the idea that (all) girl readers are powerless – or incompetent – to resist or rewrite the series’s negative patriarchal and postfeminist messages and to take away only what is positive in it is repeatedly called into question by research on actual Twilight fans and fan fiction. Fan and fan fiction studies suggest that many readers, including readers who self-identify as fans, can and do resist subjectification to the conservative patriarchal politics of the series – and can and do make more of Bella’s sexual desires than merely an internalization of the idea that abstinence before marriage is sexy. In her study of fan interactions with the series, Mukherjea (2011: 70, 83) notes that many of the fans she studied “self-identified as feminist, queer, and/or queer-friendly, and yet they described finding affirming or even emancipatory messages in these books”, and she observes that many fans “do read actively, joyfully, and creatively, deftly relating *Twilight*, in a host of different ways, to their material worlds and lived experiences.” Elizabeth Behm-Morawitz et al. (2010:145-146) find in their study of fan responses to love and romance in the series that a “feminist identity” is associated with a reduced likelihood of preferring Bella and Edward’s

relationship to other relationships in the series. Sara K. Day's (2014: 40, 42, 43) study of *Twilight* fan fiction written by teenagers reveals "many adolescent women's ability not only to recognize but also to rework the messages about romance and sex set forth in Meyer's novels". Day (2014: 42) argues that "fan responses provide clear insights into readers' decisions to rework and revise the texts to reflect more flexible, inclusive views of sexuality". The changes and additions to the story evident in teenagers' fan fiction suggest to her that the erotic potential of Meyer's series "is filtered through the imaginations and desires of the young women who find her novels both inspiring and, apparently, incomplete" (Day 2014: 43). She concludes that:

by relying on the fictional world as a space for sexual curiosity, fantasy fulfillment, and erotic exploration, adolescent women authors of *Twilight* fan fiction demonstrate their potential to understand and navigate a number of possible responses to the messages and warnings that Meyer and others so frequently present. (Day 2014: 44)

The idea that the most common – or even the only – response to Meyer's messages and warnings in the *Twilight* books is uncritical absorption is also called into question by established theoretical work in the field of children's literature. Towards the end of the twentieth century, Peter Hollindale wrote an article entitled 'Ideology and the Children's Book', which would prove to be seminal for the field. In it, Hollindale (1988: 23-24) argues that:

in the very period when developments in literary theory have made us newly aware of the omnipresence of ideology in all literature, and the impossibility of confining its occurrence to visible surface features of the text, the study of ideology in children's literature has been increasingly restricted to such surface features by the polarities of critical debate.... In turn, this inevitably leads to a situation where too much stress is placed on *what* children read and too little on *how* they read it.

Hollindale (1988: 32) concludes, importantly, that: “In the case of children’s literature, our thinking may be affected by an oversimplified stereotype of possible authority and influence.”

The study of ideology and children’s literature – including YA literature – has developed immensely since Hollindale’s 1988 article.<sup>19</sup> But the impact of such development on ideological and political study of *Twilight* has been relatively small. Scholars such as Behm-Morawitz et al. (2010), Mukherjea (2011) and Day (2014), who examine the ways in which some *Twilight* fans resist identification with the conservative gender and abstinence politics of the series, are a small minority among those who have studied it. Even writers such as Franiuk and Scherr (2013), who merely acknowledge the possibility of such resistance, are rarer than they should be. Decades after Hollindale’s article, scholarly thinking on *Twilight* continues to be deeply ‘affected by an oversimplified stereotype of possible authority and influence’.

This may be because the role of *Twilight* as a cultural phenomenon, embracing not only the novel series but also film, tourism, and large and vocal fandoms and anti-fandoms, has made media studies, communication studies and popular cultural studies some of the most common fields of scholarly study of the series. Combined with a tendency among some scholars of children’s literature to neglect popular mass-market texts and series in favour of books and writers with

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<sup>19</sup> See for example John Stephens’s (1992) *Language and Ideology in Children’s Fiction* for a more substantial examination of the operation of ideology in children’s books, or Kerry Mallan’s (2009) *Gender Dilemmas in Children’s Fiction* for ways in which contemporary gender theory can meaningfully illuminate children’s books and film.

more literary or historical respectability,<sup>20</sup> this means there has been comparatively little study of the Twilight books *as YA books*, by literary scholars of YA and children's literature. It is thus not surprising that much writing on Twilight appears to return to a time before many of the literary theoretical insights that are now largely taken for granted in the study of children's literature had gained currency.

It is also unsurprising that much Twilight scholarship either ignores, or is comparatively uninformed about, the context of YA fiction within which the series is situated. As a result, the series has been widely criticized as sexually repressed and repressive. Platt (2010: 73), for example, argues that it has a regressive ideology of sexual desire. Mukherjea (2011: 70, 72) finds the Twilight books to be "entrenched in ... sexually repressive norms". Anthea Taylor (2012: 41) argues that Bella's "agency is thwarted time and again in the novels, especially in terms of her sexual expression", while Jessica Taylor (2014: 397) points out, similarly, that Bella's "sexuality is only fully achieved after she capitulates to marriage, thereby readmitting her into a society that values

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<sup>20</sup> A glance at the contents pages of recent issues of several important journals in the field of children's and YA literature – *The Lion and the Unicorn* (39,1), *Children's Literature in Education* (46,1), *International Research in Children's Literature* (8.1), *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* (40,3), and *Papers: Explorations into Children's Literature* (23,1) – suggests that this is a significant tendency, finding a total of 29 articles, of which 15 are about classic children's authors and/or respected writers for adults (Mary Wollstonecraft, AA Milne, Rudyard Kipling, Roald Dahl and Salman Rushdie); prizewinning children's authors (Shaun Tan, Janne Teller and Sarah Singleton); prizewinning books (*The Hundred Dresses* (Estes 1944), *10,000 Dresses* (Ewert 2008), *Tom's Midnight Garden* (Pierce 1958), *Feed* (Anderson 2002), *Requiem for a Beast* (Ottley 2007) and *Almost Astronauts* (Stone 2009)); classic texts (*The Secret Garden* (Burnett 1911) and a retelling and translation of Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (Jingyu 2012) for schools in China); and fairy tales.

conservative sexual politics.” And Siegel (2011: 267) takes the perspective that “it is important for young women to freely explore sexuality, and learn by doing”, and that from this perspective, the *Twilight* series “seems dangerously misogynist.” In a comparison with related adult genres such as sexually explicit urban fantasy – to which Siegel (2011: 263-264) compares it unfavourably – or mass-market romance – to which Mukherjea (2011: 71, 75) compares it – such arguments surrounding sexual repression in the series are largely valid. In a comparison with a limited number of unusual or groundbreaking YA titles – Mukherjea (2011: 71) compares it, for instance, to Judy Blume’s *Tiger Eyes* ([1981] 2014) and Laurie Halse Anderson’s *Prom* (2005) – they also have some validity. Judy Blume’s books are, however, as I have stated in Chapter One, exceptional in their attitudes to teenage sexuality, and it is perhaps on the foundation of such exceptions that the discourses of sex and desire in YA fiction are changing. Such change – despite details such as oral sex in *Prom* (Anderson 2005) – is, however, gradual; like Kokkola (2013: 40), I think that YA fiction remains “largely conservative”. In a comparison with the majority of YA fiction, then, to misprize *Twilight* for being sexually repressed and repressive is, in my opinion, misguided.

### **Desire without shame**

In fact, Bella’s sexual desire for Edward is the centre of her story. As many teenagers might, she dresses up her desire as love. She and Edward are both virgins when they marry, both each other’s first love, and both certain that, for

them, lust cannot exist without love (Meyer 2005: 311). But, while it is true that Bella thinks of sex with Edward only after they have fallen in love, her narrative makes it clear that desire is central to her love, and that her desire for Edward predates her love for him. It predates, even, her knowing him.

They meet in the biology classroom, where they sit next to each other. Edward avoids her rudely during their first class together, frightened by the appeal of her blood. In their second class together, he introduces himself and they chat briefly. Then he catches her hand to stop her from moving something that he wants to look at. Despite the mundane circumstances, his effect on Bella during this second meeting is powerfully embodied: “When he touched me,” she says, “it stung my hand as if an electric current had passed through us” (Meyer 2005: 45). And after only one conversation, her attraction to him is already literally irresistible: she describes his face as “such a distraction” that she tries “not to look at it any more than courtesy” demands (Meyer 2005: 48), but when they finish their work she is left “with nothing to do but try not to look at him ... *unsuccessfully*” (Meyer 2005: 46; my italics).

The next day Bella is nearly killed by an out-of-control van in the school parking lot; even during the life-threatening accident, her awareness of Edward makes him stand out for her “from a sea of faces” (Meyer 2005: 56). After he uses superhuman speed and strength to save her, she asks him how he got to her so quickly. His effect on her is, however, so powerful that in looking at him she is “disoriented again by the force of his gold-colored eyes”, and, despite the extraordinary nature of what she has seen, forgets what she is asking him (Meyer

2005: 57). Later, she says:

I wondered to myself why no one else had seen him standing so far away, before he was suddenly, impossibly saving my life. With chagrin, I realized the probable cause – no one else was as aware of Edward as I always was. No one else watched him the way I did. (Meyer 2005: 69)

That night she dreams of him (Meyer 2005: 67), and from then on he is in her dreams “nearly every night” (Meyer 2005: 68). These dreams, like her hyperawareness of Edward, not only manifest but also reinforce and intensify her already strongly embodied desire for him.

Her embodied sensitivity to his physical presence and her unspoken desire for him thus continue even when he then cuts her dead for several weeks, worried about having exposed his superhuman abilities to her, and in biology class she continues to be “always ... electrically aware of Edward sitting close enough to touch” (Meyer 2005: 72). When, eventually, she catches him staring at her, her response is located in her body: not only is she unable to look away, but her hands start shaking (Meyer 2005: 73). It is important to note that at this point Bella has no reason to suspect that Edward might be dangerous, and in fact she does not suspect this at all. Her hands shake not in fear but in excitement, and the root of her excitement is sexual. She writes: “I couldn’t believe the rush of emotion pulsing through me – just because he’d happened to look at me for the first time in a half-dozen weeks” (Meyer 2005: 74). She barely knows Edward, but his gaze on her has an uncontrollable physical effect; thus what she refers to as an unspecified ‘emotion’ is in fact embodied desire. Even saying his name causes “a thrill” to pass through her body (Meyer 2005: 84), and while sitting

with him at lunch she cannot eat for the butterflies in her stomach (Meyer 2005: 91). When he tells her, with “gloriously intense” eyes and a “smoldering” voice, that he is tired of trying to stay away from her, she finds that she cannot “remember how to breathe” (Meyer 2005: 84). Whatever Bella may tell herself and the reader about love, it is clear that her initial attraction to Edward is physical and sexual, and the strength of its embodiment suggests the strength of her as-yet unacknowledged, even unrecognized, sexual desire for him.

This desire only grows stronger, more conscious and more open as she comes to know Edward better and to commit herself to him. When a girl called Jessica asks her about her first dinner with Edward, she asks if he has kissed Bella.

“No,” I mumbled. “It’s not like that.”  
She looked disappointed. I’m sure I did, too.  
“Do you think Saturday . . . ?” She raised her eyebrows.  
“I really doubt it.” The discontent in my voice was poorly disguised. (Meyer 2005: 203)

Being a particularly quiet and reserved person, Bella is practised at the lies and evasions necessary to hide her feelings. She is unquestionably perfectly capable of hiding disappointment and disguising discontent, and she usually puts particular effort into hiding and disguising her feelings in front of Jessica, whom she experiences as an intrusive gossip. Furthermore, she is well aware that Edward has a supernatural ability to hear people’s thoughts (with the exception of hers), and that he is listening in on Jessica’s thoughts in order to hear the conversation and find out how Bella feels about him. That she puts so little effort into keeping her desire for Edward to kiss her from either gossipy Jessica or

Edward himself suggests both the strength of her desire and – crucially – her lack of shame or embarrassment about it.

Her lack of shame is a key reason that I cannot support a description of Bella's story as repressed and repressive. Bella is shy, as anyone who is both reserved and inexperienced might be. But, like Fleur Diamond (2011: 47), I would characterize her story not as one of sexual repression, but as "a sexual *Bildungsroman*, in which ... Bella ... quests for a sexuality that is not fully available to her within the dominant codes of both gender and heterosexuality in her culture." Diamond (2011: 42) argues that:

the presence of the supernatural provides a narrative space for a female sexuality that is neither the passive, asexual 'good girl' promoted by conservative discourses of adolescent sexuality, nor the specularised, sex-object that has become the commercial representation of female (hetero)sexuality under the influence of so-called 'raunch culture'....

Instead, Diamond (2011: 42) argues, Bella seeks "a frank ownership of desire and sexual agency that is conventionally reserved for men and which, when present in women, is regarded with suspicion" (even, it appears, by some supposedly sex-positive feminists). Diamond (2011: 48) writes that "unlike the classic romantic *ingénue*, Bella is conscious of her desire and of her ability to attract the hero. She cannot protest her innocence, as the reader is privy to the decisions she makes with a view to attaining her romantic goals." Even more importantly, in my opinion, she does not try to protest her innocence; she does not view her own desire as a source of guilt.

Rather, she is open about her desire to have sex with Edward from the earliest

days of their relationship. While they are still getting to know one another, she asks him – shyly, but openly and hopefully – whether vampires want and have sex as humans do, and whether it will be possible for the two of them to have sex “someday” (Meyer 2005: 310). She tries to seduce him (Meyer 2007: 442-443), and is unwilling to give up on desire when he is steadfast in refusing, despite acknowledging that she has never made herself “quite so vulnerable before” (Meyer 2007: 444). So she tries logic, arguing that after she becomes a vampire she will be different, and that she would like to experience sex as she is now, as well as that she believes he would be incapable of hurting her because of the strength of his wish not to do so (Meyer 2007: 445-448). She prioritizes her own desire so highly that she is willing even to beg Edward for sex (Meyer 2007: 448), whispering “Please.... It’s all I want. Please.” In the end, they agree on a compromise in which she promises to give him what he wants – marriage – in exchange for his giving her what she wants: to have sex with him, and to do so before she is changed into a vampire (Meyer 2007: 450).

Bella’s desire does not falter when sex is imminent. At the start of their honeymoon, Edward suggests a swim after their long journey and before they have sex. As he removes his shirt on the way to the beach, the embodiment of her desire is as powerful as ever, and she asks: “Did my skin burst into flames? I had to look down to check. Nope, nothing was burning. At least, not visibly” (Meyer 2008: 31). Before she joins him in the water she begins to breathe too quickly, her hands tremble, she feels dizzy, and she suspects that she may be about to have a panic attack (Meyer 2008: 32). She remains clear, however, that she still wishes to have sex with Edward: “I wasn’t freaking out because I thought we

were making a mistake. Not at all. I was freaking out because I had no idea how to do this, and I was afraid to walk out of this room and face the unknown” (Meyer 2008: 32). Her panic is nothing more than virginal nervousness. She marches “determinedly” (Meyer 2008: 32) out to Edward, and when she sees his body in the moonlight it is desire, rather than nervousness, that is dominant in her:

The fire was no longer a flash burn across my skin – it was slow and deep now; it smoldered away all my awkwardness, my shy uncertainty. I slipped the towel off without hesitation, leaving it on the tree with his clothes, and walked out into the white light.... (Meyer 2008: 33).

Bella yet again confirms how much she desires Edward as she leans against him in the water: “This moment was so perfect, so right, there was no way to doubt it” (Meyer 2008: 33). And as he embraces her, her arousal and pleasurable responsiveness spike and she says, “It felt like every nerve ending in my body was a live wire” (Meyer 2008: 33).

When she wakes the next morning, her first response is joy so great that she does not open her eyes because, she says, “I was too happy to change anything, no matter how small” (Meyer 2008: 33). The first things she feels are the heat of the sun (Meyer 2008: 33) and her own physical contentment: “I was comfortable, even with the baking sun. His cool skin was the perfect antidote to the heat. Lying across his wintry chest, his arms wound around me, felt very easy and natural” (Meyer 2008: 33). Her head is filled with “many layers of bliss” (Meyer 2008: 34). As discussed above, Siegel (2011: 270) responds to Bella’s bruising after sex with the suggestion of a honeymoon rape. The reality, however, is that

nothing either before or after the event suggests anything but Bella's passionate desire and enthusiastic consent, carefully considered and repeatedly and explicitly expressed. To argue otherwise requires one either to ignore Bella's own words or to assign her a false consciousness, implying a contempt for the teenage girl character to match the contempt I have already discussed for the teenage girl fan – a contempt that seems to me to be both contrary to the spirit of feminism, as I understand it, and fundamentally anti-girl.

To argue that the series is sexually repressive similarly disregards much of what is said and done in the novels. I would argue that, far from being repressed, Bella is so insistent and persistent in her determination to satisfy her sexual desires that if she were a boy and Edward a girl, her refusal to take no for an answer would make for extremely uncomfortable reading. It is not unreasonable to argue that aspects of the series are sexually repressive, firstly, because Edward constantly tries to control Bella's desires (see for example Anthea Taylor 2012: 41; Platt 2010: 79; McGeough 2010: 91); secondly, because these are ultimately satisfied only when sanctified within marriage (see for example Anthea Taylor 2012: 42; Jessica Taylor 2014: 397, Kokkola 2011: 166; Silver 2010: 127); and thirdly, in Anthea Taylor's (2012: 42) words, because Bella's desire, although "palpable", is "also coded as dangerous, as teenage sexuality (especially of girls) often is" (for similar arguments see Jessica Taylor 2014: 397; Platt 2010: 76, 79, 80; Kokkola 2011: 174). But such arguments are incomplete if they fail to recognize how very unusual and liberating it is for a YA novel to represent and to engage so determinedly with a teenage heroine's powerfully embodied sexual desires.

Furthermore, the first argument, that the series is repressive because of the way Edward tries to control Bella's desires, is undermined by how very unsuccessful Edward's attempts to control Bella generally are. Danielle Dick McGeough (2010: 90) argues that, "rather than celebrate or embrace Bella's sexual desires, the novels treat her sexual longing as excessive. Because Bella is unable to control her desire, Edward must regulate her desires for her". Undeniably, Edward's approach to his relationship with Bella is that of the domineering Edwardian patriarch he was born and raised to be. Edward is however ill-equipped for, and ultimately unsuccessful at, controlling a woman not born and raised to be a submissive and dutiful Edwardian daughter and wife. The series has a marked pattern in which a genuine or perceived danger arises; Edward tries to protect Bella from it through control and constraint; Bella submits until it no longer suits her to do so; and Bella then breaks free of constraint and does exactly what she wishes to do. Sexually, this pattern plays out so that Bella ultimately gets everything she desires. Over time, she forces Edward to move by negotiated degrees from initially saying that he does not think sex will ever be possible for them (Meyer 2005: 310), through agreeing to have sex with her once she is a vampire (Meyer 2007: 445), to submitting to her insistent desire to have sex with him while still human (Meyer 2007: 450). It is true that Edward's controlling response to Bella's desire supports the promotion of chastity and abstinence in the series. But I cannot agree with McGeough (2010: 90) that this implies that Bella's desires are treated as 'excessive'. Instead – as I will argue below – Bella's desires are both celebrated and rewarded in the novels.

Much has been made of the second argument, that the series is repressive

because of Bella's compromise in having to marry before having sex. Anthea Taylor (2012: 42), for example, argues that Edward:

effectively coerces Bella into an exogamous marriage in an effort to exert control over her becoming-vampire and over her very self.... The narrative therefore diffuses the threat Bella poses as an active sexual agent; maintains patriarchal hegemony; and evidences the 'hypermatrimonial turn' in postfeminist popular culture (Negra, 2009: 81).

This argument is another that ignores the evidence of the text. Edward does not, in fact, effectively coerce Bella into marriage at all. He and Bella negotiate a compromise in which she gets what she desires at a time, and under circumstances, that are acceptable to him. This is what people who have consensual sex do all the time, for example when one partner insists on a condom that the other would prefer to do without, or prefers one particular position, or location, or time of day, over another. Bella and Edward's negotiation takes place between kisses, so one might argue that her difficulty controlling her body when she kisses Edward affects her judgement. I find such a claim difficult, however, to integrate with what Bella describes as "my attempt to trap him with his words" (Meyer 2007: 442), or with her statements that "Getting married is a stretch for me. I'm not giving in unless I get something in return" (Meyer 2007: 445); that "My words tumbled out as I rushed to take advantage of the sudden uncertainty in his eyes" (Meyer 2007: 448); that it feels like Edward's "surrender" (Meyer 2007: 449) when he kisses her; that "Again, I took what advantage I could" (Meyer 2007: 448); or that "The thrill of victory was a strange high; it made me feel powerful. Brave" (Meyer 2007: 449). Yet even if Bella's experience of their negotiation is indeed hopelessly coloured by her body and its desire, and even if she does, in fact, have no control over herself or Edward

during it, Edward does not whisk her away to an immediate clandestine ceremony. Bella can end her engagement at any time in the weeks before their wedding; she chooses not to because she values her desire too highly.

Taylor is quite right that Bella's marriage evidences a postfeminist turn to the 'hypermatrimonial' and maintains patriarchal hegemony; the institution of marriage is one of the foundations of this hegemony and thus cannot disentangle or extricate itself from it, and Bella and Edward certainly make no attempt to seek or explore a version of marriage that might. I will also grant that her marriage 'diffuses the threat Bella poses as an active sexual agent'. As I have said, there is, unquestionably, much for a feminist to dislike in the Twilight novels, and there is much in their postfeminism, politics and gender characterizations that deeply concerns me. But Bella does not exist, somehow real and isolate, beyond her readers: she signifies only to and in the perceptions and receptions of these readers. And what she signifies is not only threat: it is also promise. In pragmatic, rather than political, terms, the promise of her desire and its ecstatic fulfilment is not diffused, but rather facilitated, by marriage. It is of great political concern to me that this facilitation is necessary, but I do not believe that this negates the power of her endorsement of sexual desire, and of sex, for a readership – and in a literature – sorely lacking in such endorsement. The promise of desire, and its fulfilment in pleasure, is a promise that adult readers and theorists can afford to dismiss, but that – for Twilight's intended readership of teenage girls – is a powerful counter to the missing discourse of desire in their education, their books, and perhaps, more broadly, their lives. Bella is the promise of a postcard that confirms, "SEX IS AS GOOD AS WE THOUGHT IT WOULD BE!!!", and her

desire is more use to most teenage girls – both pragmatically and politically – as such a promise than as a threat. As threat, the meaning and power of her desire is located away from her readers, in the (adult) patriarchal hegemony that it would resist. As promise, its meaning and power are located in the teenage girl reader to whom the promise is made.

What of the third argument, that the series is repressive because of the coding of Bella's desire as dangerous? It is not, in fact, 'coded' as dangerous at all – unless to state something explicitly and repeatedly is to code it. As Taylor (2012: 42) herself says, when she argues that Bella's sexual desire is 'coded as dangerous', Bella "persistently attempts to push the barriers erected by [Edward] on the grounds of her own protection". Taylor allows the novel to speak for itself when she quotes Bella: "Edward had drawn many careful lines for our physical relationship, with the intent being to keep me alive" (Meyer 2006 quoted in Taylor 2012: 42). Similarly, Taylor quotes Edward, refusing to have sex with Bella until she is a vampire: "Later, when you're less breakable" (Meyer 2007 quoted in Taylor 2012: 42). The novel does indeed speak for itself in these quotations: Bella's desire is not coded as dangerous; rather, the danger of her desire is a central theme, represented explicitly by a writer who is well known to be a committed Mormon and who says things in media interviews such as: "I don't even read traditional romance.... It's too smutty. There's a reason my books have a lot of innocence. That's the sort of world I live in" (quoted in Cochrane 2013: n.p.).

I am not quibbling in order to score points while ignoring the import of Taylor's

criticism. I argued at length in Chapter Two that the association of girls' desire with danger is itself dangerous to girls. The making-dangerous of Bella's desires matters. Nevertheless, whether her desires are made dangerous explicitly or indirectly – in words and theme, or in code – matters too, and perhaps more. It is a question of Hollindale's (1988: 23-24) observation that while it is impossible to confine ideology "to visible surface features of the text, the study of ideology in children's literature has been increasingly restricted to such surface features". Hollindale (1988: 28, 29-30, original italics) distinguishes between what he calls "intended surface ideology" and "*passive* ideology". Intended surface ideology, Hollindale (1988: 27) writes, "is made up of the explicit social, political or moral beliefs of the individual writer, and his [sic] wish to recommend them to children through the story."

This is the most conspicuous element in the ideology of children's books, and the easiest to detect. Its presence is conscious, deliberate and in some measure 'pointed', even when ... there is nothing unusual or unfamiliar in the message the writer is hoping to convey. (Hollindale 1988: 28)

Hollindale (1988: 29-30) states, however, that "in literature as in life the undeserved advantage lies with *passive* ideology", the "ideological content" that reflects "the individual writer's unexamined assumptions." He argues, credibly:

It might seem that values whose presence can only be convincingly demonstrated by an adult with some training in critical skills are unlikely to carry much potency with children. More probably the reverse is true: the values at stake are usually those which are taken for granted by the writer, and reflect the writer's integration in a society which unthinkingly accepts them. In turn this means that children, unless they are helped to notice what is there, will take them for granted too. Unexamined, passive values are widely *shared* values, and we should not underestimate the powers of reinforcement vested in quiescent and unconscious ideology. (Hollindale 1988: 30)

If the association of Bella's desires with danger were coded, then it would carry all the influence of passive ideology. But it is, in fact, very clearly an intended surface ideology, less compelling and more likely to admit of, or even invite, conscious resistance – as indeed it has been shown to do in the fan response studies discussed above (see Mukherjea 2011; Behm-Morawitz et al. 2010; Day 2014). Hollindale (1988: 31) points out, rightly, that sometimes “the conscious surface ideology and the passive ideology of a novel are at odds with each other, and ‘official’ ideas contradicted by unconscious assumptions.” The *Twilight* series is such a case. As Diamond (2011: 47), quite brilliantly, recognizes:

*Twilight's* female protagonist's quest for her own desire is obscured by the characterisation of Bella as a classically passive romantic heroine. Bella Swan's romance with Edward Cullen and, latterly, his wolf shape-shifter rival Jacob Black, is as much a pursuit of her own wild carnality as it is of the two young men in and of themselves. This pursuit, however, is conducted in the sub-text of the series, and is disguised by Bella's portrayal. In this way, Meyer's text is structured like the nineteenth-century texts that are the focus of Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's classic study in feminist poetics *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979)... *Twilight* is a deeply ambivalent work. Meyer's texts exhibit on a structural level what adolescent girls are pressured to perform on a social level – to assume a sexually conventional exterior while a fugitive text of female sexual agency is suggested between the lines.

Part of this sexually conventional exterior is a plot about sexual danger. Along with the fugitive text of female sexual agency is one of teenage girls' desire, and even pleasure. As discussed in Chapter One, feminists have known of the tension between pleasure and danger in women's negotiations of sexuality – at least – since it was foregrounded by Carole S. Vance in 1984. Meyer's work – as a series about a teenage woman's negotiations of sexuality, written for teenage women, and by a woman who cannot but draw on her own experiences of negotiating sexuality – is inevitably subject to this tension. Where most fiction for this

audience resolves this tension by overdetermining danger, the ambivalence of *Twilight*, the inconsistency of its surface and passive ideologies, opens a space in which this tension is resolved – albeit unintentionally – in pleasure.

### **The desiring reader**

Perhaps one of the reasons that many readers have so readily revised and reworked the text to accommodate more open views of sexuality is that it offers a form of sexual pleasure not only to its heroine, but also to its readers; it invites readers to share with Bella the kinaesthetic and affective knowledge of the erotic pleasure of looking. Shachar (2011:151) argues that part of the appeal of the novels “lies in their overt voyeuristic tone, almost as if we are reading a young woman’s private diary.” Mukherjea (2011: 76) uses the term scopophilia, “the love of looking”, for the voyeurism that the series invites. She points out that scopophilia has “historically been the privilege of men – often men gazing appreciatively at other men or boys but usually men looking at women.” As Laura Mulvey (1975: 442) has argued influentially, film has traditionally constituted “Woman as image, man as bearer of the look”:

The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*. Woman displayed as sexual object is the *leitmotif* of erotic spectacle ... she holds the look, and plays to and signifies male desire. (Mulvey 1975: 442; original italics)

But *Twilight* veritably wallows in the voyeuristic pleasure of a gaze that is

female, relishing the reward of both Bella and her teenage readers' desires with pleasure. The novels are filled with descriptions of supernaturally attractive men and boys, routinely framed from the perspective of a staring heroine. When Bella first learns that vampire skin sparkles in the sun, for instance, she says:

Edward in the sunlight was shocking. I couldn't get used to it, though I'd been staring at him all afternoon. His skin, white despite the faint flush from yesterday's hunting trip, literally sparkled, like thousands of tiny diamonds were embedded in the surface. He lay perfectly still in the grass, his shirt open over his sculpted, incandescent chest, his scintillating arms bare. His glistening, pale lavender lids were shut, though of course he didn't sleep. A perfect statue, carved in some unknown stone, smooth like marble, glittering like crystal. (Meyer 2005: 282)

The pleasure of this passage lies not only in its description of Edward's beauty, but also in the sense that this beauty is displayed for Bella's – and the reader's – erotic consumption. What is the purpose of sparkle, if not display and exhibition? Edward is naturally and unvaryingly icily cold; for what reason, then, would Meyer have him open his shirt other than to exhibit his hard, 'sculpted' chest, to style his image in accordance with a female fantasy, 'to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*'? The intimate, voyeuristic feel of the novels invites identification with Bella, and thus – like the novels' pleasurable lingering over their many descriptions of male beauty and bodies – invites identification with Bella's constant gaze.

This pleasurable gaze is repeatedly emphasized by her narrative. At her wedding, she says:

*All I really saw was Edward's face; it filled my vision and overwhelmed my mind. His eyes were a buttery, burning gold; his perfect face was almost severe with the depth of his emotion. And then, as he met my awed gaze, he broke into a breathtaking smile of exultation. (Meyer 2008: 21; my italics)*

As Edward waits for her in the sea, naked, on their honeymoon, her description of his body again includes a reminder of her own gaze:

The pallid light of the moon turned his skin a perfect white, like the sand, like the moon itself, and made his wet hair black as the ocean. He was motionless, his hands resting palms down against the water; the low waves broke around him as if he were a stone. *I stared* at the smooth line of his back, his shoulders, his arms, his neck, the flawless shape of him... (Meyer 2008: 36; my italics)

With Jacob, similarly, Bella's narrative voice never allows the reader to forget her act of looking:

His excited grin stretched wide across his face, the bright teeth standing in vivid contrast to the deep russet color of his skin. *I'd never seen* his hair out of its usual ponytail before. It fell like black satin curtains on either side of his broad face. (Meyer 2006: 143; my italics)

I would not wish to suggest that a simple appropriation of the objectifying gaze from male to female – reversing but maintaining a fundamental power differential that is expressed in the roles of 'image' and 'bearer of the look' – is a feminist victory. Pleasure, however, for teenage girls *is* an important victory, and the voyeuristic pleasure of these novels is likely a significant part of their appeal for readers. According to Mukherjea (2011: 76-77; original italics):

Building texts around the bodies of desired men might be a relatively new phenomenon. The male leads in Austen and Brontë novels may have been beguiling, but they were seldom perfect. Even as the reader admires Mr. Darcy's height or Mr. Rochester's expressive brow or either man's bank account, s/he is left with relatively little information about what the man looks like *precisely*. Popular romance novels and the newer genre of 'chick lit' lavish many words on such description, and Meyer's descriptions of Edward and Jacob are as lovingly detailed. (Mukherjea 2011: 76-77)

Importantly, Mukherjea's (2011: 78) research among Twilight fans found that:

“Accepting Edward and Jacob as ready objects of desire ... allowed these fans to be desiring subjects and to indulge some pleasurable actions of desire – the looking and fantasizing and talking about.”

Ignoring, dismissing or simply failing to see the series’s rewarding of desire with a celebration of and invitation to scopophilic pleasure, some scholars have read *Twilight* as part of the tradition in YA literature in which girls’ sexuality is punished. As I have discussed, Bella’s unplanned pregnancy has been figured as a punishment, but in fact Bella responds to it, and to her child, with joy. In addition to the unexpected reward of an adorable daughter, by the end of the series Bella has everything she wants – Edward; the power, beauty and agelessness of being a vampire; a close continuing relationship with her parents despite her vampirism; and an immortal lifetime of blissful sex with Edward – and she has had to make minimal compromises – marriage, and a little patience – in exchange. These are the rewards of postfeminism, rather than of feminism, and I could certainly wish that Bella wanted various other things. But I do not think that a responsible feminist should dismiss the fact that these are the rewards that she would choose, or that an informed feminist critic should ignore the facts that – in powerful contrast to the tradition of YA fiction that punishes girls’ desire and sexuality – *Twilight* not only allows Bella to satisfy her desire for Edward unpunished, but in fact richly rewards her, for her desire and for valuing it enough to express it and pursue its satisfaction, with everything that she wishes for.

The fugitive passive ideology that seeps irresistibly out from beneath the surface

of Meyer's presumable intended warning of danger and limiting of sex to marriage is one that revels in what Kokkola (2013: 14, 29) calls "the sexiness of sex", one that values its girl heroine's desire enough to bask in it – enough, even, to allow her to fulfil it. It is an ideology that celebrates girls' desire, their sexual agency, and indeed their *jouissance*, with the joyous postcard of shared, unashamed, unconcealed promise that "SEX IS AS GOOD AS WE THOUGHT IT WOULD BE!!!"

## Chapter Four

### **An Ideology of Shame: Daniel Handler's *Why We Broke Up***

I have argued that *Twilight* is exceptional in undermining an intended surface ideology of chastity and restraint through a passive ideology that celebrates and rejoices in girls' desire. In this chapter, I wish to consider, with the same feminist lens through which I considered *Twilight*, the far more common obverse: a novel that overtly approves girls' sexuality, but covertly undermines this endorsement through a passive ideology of shame in girls' sexual desire.

#### **Troubling critical triumph**

It is illuminating to compare the critical reception of *Twilight* with that of Daniel Handler's *Why We Broke Up* (Handler 2012). *Why We Broke Up* has received not only popular but, unlike *Twilight*, also critical acclaim. It was sufficiently successful for a film version to be planned, with Hailee Steinfeld – a respected actress who has been nominated for Academy, British Academy of Film and Television Arts, and Golden Globe Awards – in the lead (Fleming 2012: n.p.).<sup>21</sup> It was a Printz Honor book of 2012, and the 2012 Printz Award page of the American Library Association (ALA) website describes it as a “beautiful piece of bookmaking” (ALA n.d. a: n.p.). Martin Chilton (2012: n.p.), at the time Culture

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<sup>21</sup> The film has however not been produced.

Editor of *The Telegraph* online, gave the novel four stars out of five; his review describes it as “poignant and witty”. And in the *New York Times*, Monica Edinger (2011: n.p.), a fourth-grade teacher, writes effusively of Handler’s style and inventiveness:

One of the book’s many charms is that Min [the heroine] can’t go long without resorting to a film reference, often a full synopsis of a beloved movie. Handler has made them all up, but so superbly you feel certain they must really exist. He does similar magic with music; I still want to hear the sounds of Hawk Davies, whose delightful jazz seems to flow through the book.

Edinger (2011: n.p.) concludes:

Filled with long, lovely riffs of language (some paragraphs of Min’s moody reflections go on for over a page), exquisite scenes of teenage life and the sad souvenirs of one high school relationship, “Why We Broke Up” is a silken, bittersweet tale of adolescent heartache.

By comparison, Bella Swan’s pedestrian voice has little tone or modulation, and Stephenie Meyer does not appear to aspire to wittiness. Her descriptions of Edward’s piano compositions in *Twilight* are generic: Bella enjoys “a composition so complex, so luxuriant, it was impossible to believe only one set of hands played” (Meyer 2005: 325), and describes Edward’s playing as “unbearably sweet” (Meyer 2005: 326). It is fair to say that Handler’s work and the skills it demonstrates are of a type that appeals to critics and awards committees, and that Meyer’s work and the skills it demonstrates are not. However, I think that there is still more at play in the divergent critical responses to Meyer and Handler, and that there is something in their treatment of teenage girls’ sexuality and desire that plays a role in the critical reception of their work.

In the context of Handler's treatment of teenage girls' sexuality and desire, another illuminating comparison is that between Handler's novel and Judy Blume's ([1975] 2005) *Forever*. Like Blume's work published nearly 40 years before it, Handler's story has a minimal plot that exists solely to structure a discussion of its heroine's decision to have penetrative penile-vaginal sex for the first time, and of the outcomes of this decision. Like *Forever* (Blume [1975] 2005), *Why We Broke Up* (Handler 2012) is focussed on a romantic and sexual relationship that ends in infidelity. But where Blume's heroine, Katherine, thinks after her relationship with her first lover ends, "I'll never regret one single thing we did together" (Blume [1975] 2005: 177), the fundamental theme of Handler's novel is Min's overwhelming, even crippling, sense of regret, loss, and shame. Where the infidelity at the end of Katherine's relationship is Katherine's – she and her boyfriend grow apart naturally and she eventually kisses somebody else – in Handler's story, Min discovers suddenly and devastatingly that her boyfriend, Ed, has been sexually involved with someone else throughout their relationship, and that his sexual faithlessness has been compounded by emotional perfidy and deception. Min has been confident in Ed's love for her because he has been so actively involved in her quixotic plan to throw a glamorous surprise eighty-ninth birthday party for a film star called Lottie Carson, whom she thinks she spots on her first date with Ed as they leave the theatre after watching an old Lottie Carson film, and whom they then follow home. It emerges, however, that Ed has known from the start that Lottie Carson died at 75. Everything that Min has believed about her relationship with Ed has thus been a lie, and she is shattered. Where Katherine's cheating kiss proves her to be an actor in her own sexual life, and where her acting on her desire signifies

her ownership of her own sexuality, Ed's casual and habitual cheating makes Min a passive victim of her desire for him, signifying her surrender of ownership of her own sexuality in response to him. She is, in fact, a striking example of the way in which the performance of passive femininity makes it natural for girls to surrender control of their sexuality to others (see Chapter Two) – even when, like Min, they do experience the desire that passive femininity requires, and assists, them to hide and cover.

Young adult fiction is strongly grounded in the tradition of what has been called the problem novel: typically a book that uses plot and character as vehicles to expose, examine and engage more or less pedagogically with a specific issue seen as a pressing problem in the lives of contemporary teenagers. Christine Jenkins (1998: 298-299) refers to the problem novel as “a specific narrative form that is strongly identified with YA fiction as a whole” and describes problem novel narratives as “stories involving contemporary social issues”. Michael Cart (2004: n.p.) captures the essence of the genre with his less-restrained definition: “the ripped-from-the-headlines work of fiction ... in which the central problem becomes the tail that wags the dog of the novel.” *Forever* (Blume [1975] 2005) is a classic of the genre, and *Why We Broke Up* (Handler 2012) – despite its literary style – shows its roots in the problem novel quite clearly with its thin plot and single-issue focus. Message is often considered significant in criticism of children's literature<sup>22</sup> and, given the historical influence of the problem novel

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<sup>22</sup> This is evident in, among other things, issue-focussed prizes such as the Coretta Scott King Award, for African American writers and illustrators of children's or YA books that, according to the ALA, “demonstrate an appreciation of African American culture” (ALA n.d. b: n.p.), or the Stonewall Book Award,

within YA fiction, messages relating to contemporary social issues perhaps play an even larger role in the discussion of YA writing than in that of general children's fiction. This makes the critical silence on Min's regret, shame, passivity and sense of loss in response to her own sexual activity remarkable. The question arises of whether reviewers such as Edinger and Chilton, and the Printz Award panel of the ALA, fail to comment on the novel's negative and disempowering messages about girls' sexuality and desire because they approve of them or because they fail to notice them – in other words, because these messages represent the commonsense norm. Certainly, this area of critical silence appears to support the idea that an unacknowledged and largely unrecognized possible source of critical hostility to *Twilight* might be found in its violation of cultural norms or commonsense ideology relating to the acceptability of sexual desire and activity for teenage girls.

### **A mandate for virginity**

*Why We Broke Up* (Handler 2012), on the other hand, endorses some of the most conservative of such norms. In the United States, abstinence education programmes that wish to benefit from federal funding under Title V of the Social Security Act must have “the exclusive purpose of teaching the social, psychological, and health gains to be realized by abstaining from sexual activity”, and teach “that a mutually faithful monogamous relationship in the context of

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which was, according to the ALA, originally known as the Gay Book Award (ALA n.d. c: n.p.).

marriage is the expected standard of sexual activity”, and “that sexual activity outside marriage is likely to have harmful psychological and physical effects” (quoted in Fine & McClelland 2006: 306). Handler’s novel is a lengthy letter from Min, written to Ed to accompany and explain a box of keepsakes from their relationship that she plans to leave outside his door. The 2012 Printz Award page of the ALA website describes this letter as “raging, loving, insecure and regretful”, and Min as “heartbroken”. Min is, in fact, so ‘insecure’, ‘regretful’, ‘heartbroken’ and damaged by her sexual relationship with Ed that she could plausibly be used as a fictional case study when teaching the ‘harmful psychological ... effects’ of sex outside marriage in an abstinence education programme.

The primary, and overwhelming, psychological effects of her decision to act on her desires and have sex with Ed are manifest shame and self-loathing. Thinking back to the early days of their relationship, she writes: “Shit, I guess I already loved you then. Doomed like a wineglass knowing it’ll get dropped someday, shoes that’ll be scuffed in no time, the new shirt you’ll soon enough muck up filthy” (Handler 2012: 49). In these images of doom, Min thus describes herself as irreparably broken; roughened, worn and marked by use; and dirty. And while a heart may metaphorically be dropped and broken like a wineglass, it is not love, but sex, that inspires such images of filth and degradation from use: they directly reflect centuries-old conservative views of sex outside marriage as degrading to women. Min sees herself as doomed from the start because she desires Ed from the start, and chooses to act on her desire. In a public toilet after she and Ed have been physically intimate in a park, she says:

In the bathroom mirror there was even a smudge of dirt on my neck, and I wiped it off in a hurried flush, the cheap paper towel so rough against my skin that I looked for a scrape in my reflection and then, meeting my own eyes, stood for a sec and tried to figure, like all girls in all mirrors everywhere, the difference between lover and slut. (Handler 2012: 108)

Again there is an image of dirt; there is shame in the hurry and the flush with which she wipes the dirt off; the scrape of the ‘cheap’ paper towel is reminiscent of the shoes to be scuffed. This follows an interlude during which Min says of Ed that he “looked so gorgeous naked in the lovely lilty green light, like some creature not quite from Earth”, and of herself that she “never felt so beautiful” (Handler 2012: 104). The contrast between her feelings on the fulfilling of her desire and on the acknowledging of it afterwards is striking. It would appear that Min has, in her own mind, in fact already settled ‘the difference between lover and slut’, and not to the benefit of her own self-image, or of any other girls in any other mirrors anywhere<sup>23</sup>. Just when Min should be joying in celebration of the happy and pleasureable fulfilment of her desire, her shame at this desire and at what she does because of it cause her to see herself rather in ways that position her as irreparably sullied and damaged by it. Her shame turns her into a victim of her desire.

After she and Ed eventually have penetrative penile-vaginal intercourse for the first time, in a motel, they order pizza. She writes to Ed:

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<sup>23</sup> The appropriateness or inappropriateness of an adult male writer such as Handler choosing to use his teenage girl character to speak unequivocally for ‘all girls in all mirrors everywhere’ in order to shame them with the suggestion that their faces are always marked with some ineluctable reminder of the potential of the slut is beyond the scope of this thesis, but is an important question to the extent that it is important to consider all questions of girls’ sexual autonomy, and of the cultural roots of sexually passive femininity and indeed of patriarchy itself.

I was bashful and hid in the bathroom when it was delivered. I listened to you talk normally to the guy and even laugh at something, like it was all normal, standing in a T-shirt and boxers in the doorway, taking the pizza with the dollars in change on top while I huddled by the sink running this [comb] through my hair. I felt like I was over by a pole, a bicycle or a dog, while the owner chatted oblivious and relaxed. It was your ease, I realized, your ease and expertise that made me nauseous. I grabbed the comb, the cardboard message on the rack, like I was hiding shameful evidence. I'd never felt something like this, but you'd done it all before. (Handler 2012: 198)

Min is a very verbal and articulate teenager. When she comments that Ed talks 'normally to the guy and even laugh[s] at something, like it was all normal', it would be a mistake to assume that this is an inarticulate expression of a wish for a bigger fanfare – for an activity less ordinary and more special – after her first experience of penile penetration. It is rather exactly what it appears to be: a twice-repeated suggestion that nothing is normal about the fact that they are in a place where they have gone specifically to have sex because they desired to have it. This suggestion is offered without irony, and with full understanding that the word 'normal' describes not only what is typical, but also what is normative. The novel is divided into chapter-like sections, each introduced by an illustration representing the keepsake the section discusses. The weight Min places on her suggestion that having had sex with Ed is not normal is shown in the illustration that opens this section, a drawing of a comb that is – unlike most of the other illustrations – captioned; the caption reads: "LIKE IT WAS ALL NORMAL" (Handler 2012: 197).

Min's feeling of abnormality is reflected in her position in the bathroom, not merely hiding but 'huddled', as though in her shame she needs to make herself

smaller. Does she run a comb through her hair to cover the real reason she is in the bathroom and suggest another – does she feel shame for her shame? – or is she worried that her hair might be messy and confirm what she has been doing? She herself recognizes the role of shame in her responses, in her acknowledgement that she is acting as though she is ‘hiding shameful evidence’. And she uses the pathetic fallacy transparently to emphasize the sordidness and shame that she associates with this day when she writes: “We kissed so tender when we woke up, never mind our sour breath and the bedspread even uglier by day. But we had to run for coffee before ... anyone found out. It was already afternoon, a disapproving gray in the sky” (Handler 2012: 200). Her shame at the thought of being ‘found out’ is again evident later, when she writes, “Even after ten days, girls probably do walk different after virginity, just because we think everyone can tell” (Handler 2012: 205); the ‘disapproving’ response that she assumes ‘everyone’ will show if they can indeed ‘tell’ can by this point be taken for granted.

What of her statement that she is ‘nauseous’ because of Ed’s ‘ease and expertise’? This is critically enmeshed with the way that Min’s voice, in Handler’s novel, places an inordinate weight on a very narrowly-defined virginity and its end. Min repeatedly refers to initiation into sex with reference to a lost virginity (Handler 2012: 38, 149, 219), and the end of virginity is emphatically figured as discomposing, disorienting loss in a brief linguistic and logical discombobulation, which is introduced by an illustration of a threateningly jagged, pointy, phallically upright furred umbrella:

And my umbrella, lost that day, where is it? I know I had it that

morning. Give it back, Ed if you have it, I'm lost without it on rainy days, although it's December now, so it's they say snow, and an umbrella in a snowstorm is ridiculous, a seat belt if you're not in a car, a helmet if you're not on a bike, like a fish needs a bicycle or however they say it, like coffee needs to be black, like a virgin needs a boyfriend. So many things I'll never get back. (Handler 2012: 118)

When Min discovers Ed's cheating and lying, she is disproportionately horrified at the thought of her lost virginity:

The air was too cold, like I'd forgotten my coat, and then unbearably close and hot in my mouth, my body.... My fucking virginity, I realized with a churning lurch. You had seen everything, you had everything. Showering together. Your body inside mine. You had every scrap of skin, and I had a handful of petals in one hand, somebody else's flowers, and this [evidence that Ed has always known that Lottie Carson is dead] in the other. (Handler 2012: 217)

Ed has humiliated her, betrayed her trust, and put her at risk of a sexually-transmitted infection, but Min's visceral reaction is to the thought of the loss of her virginity, its importance emphasized by 'fucking' and the 'churning lurch' she feels at the thought of it. Hiding in the bathroom after having sex, she explicitly compares herself to a possession: "I felt like I was over by a pole, a bicycle or a dog, while the owner [Ed] chatted oblivious and relaxed" (Handler 2012: 198). Now, similarly, she links her virginity to possession: Ed has 'had everything', 'had every scrap of skin', and this is made the more bitter by how little she has in exchange.

But, at the risk of belabouring what should be self-evident, virginity is not 'everything'; in fact it is not even necessarily any thing. A sexual partner has not 'had', possessed, owned, any literal part of one: contrary to the popular image,

the hymen is not in fact a seal that is broken – or taken – during penetrative sex. Min’s marker for virginity is entirely arbitrary: she regards herself as a virgin until she has penetrative penile-vaginal intercourse, despite prior sexual experiences involving her own and Ed’s genitals (Handler 2012: 90, 104), and including orgasms for both Ed and herself (Handler 2012: 104, 132). Her virginity is a cultural construct rather than a physical reality, but when she tells Ed that subsequent to the end of this construct he has ‘every scrap of skin’, it is as though she seems to associate her virginity with some sort of material presence.

Virginity has (such) value, and a sexual partner possesses one, only within a cultural context such as that of chastity culture, of which abstinence education is an institutionalized part. In this culture, bodies – especially women’s bodies – are believed to be more valuable if they are seen as innocent or clean, and sexual experience represents, particularly for girls and young women, a material and an economic loss: a loss of currency or exchange. The loss that Min associates with her sexual experience with Ed – despite her genuine desire for this experience – suggests that she is powerfully subject to chastity culture, even if she is not aware of her subjection and even if she flouts the rules of the culture by having sex. It also suggests that within this culture her desire is of negligible value and importance, its fulfilment no exchange for what she gives up in the loss of her virginity. The value and weight that this culture places, instead, on virginity is what makes Ed’s ‘ease and expertise’ so nauseating to her. “I’d never felt something like this, but you’d done it all before” (Handler 2012: 198), she writes, suggesting that Ed’s experience diminishes and trivializes her own initiation by association. From outside chastity culture, however, I would argue rather that

the emphasis and value placed within this culture on virginity, and thus on penetrative penile-vaginal sex, amplifies and distends (the significance of) both Ed's experience and Min's initiation; that it pushes Min towards one specific kind of sex by rendering sex of any other kind childish and trivial; and that it simultaneously negates the importance of any desire that she might have for sex of any kind. I would argue also that none of this does any service to Ed or to Min – or to all the teenage readers whose experience is subject to similar transformations, pressures or negation within, or under the peripheral influence of, such a culture.

As I read Handler's novel, however, it appears to endorse the contempt for female desire within, the sex negative values of, and the overriding and distorted importance placed on virginity by, chastity culture without expressing any more than token reservations. Min asks her best friend, Al, "Am I ... is it OK to not be a virgin?" (Handler 2012: 125). Her phrasing is significant: it is not the act of sex that worries her, but the status of being virgin or not-virgin. Furthermore, she makes herself a passive victim of her desire for Ed as she explicitly surrenders her sexual autonomy and the defining of her sexual identity to him, when she reveals that it is really only Ed's opinion about this status that matters to her. She desires sex with Ed, and is certain that he desires sex with her, but she does not want to lose him to her desire. This is not a question about wise or unwise, safe or unsafe, pleasurable or unpleasurable choices. It is about currency and value: how her currency and value, as a girl to a boy, might be lessened by the loss of virgin status:

"Is it OK not to be a virgin, *yes*. Most people aren't virgins, Min.

That's why there's people to begin with."

"Yeah, but – " I jiggled my leg on the sofa. I didn't care about those people, I thought. I just cared about [Ed]. "What do you think," I asked, "is what I'm asking. You're a guy."

"Yes."

"So you know how you think about it. If a girl, you know, if you fool around in a car let's say, or a park."

"Jesus, Min. What park?"

"No, no, just if. For example."

"OK, then what kind of car? Because if it was the new M-3 –"

I pillow-swatted him. "What do people think about that?"

"People?" Al said.

"Al. Different *people*. You know!"

"Different people think different things."

"I know, but, like, a *guy*."

"Some guys like it, I guess. I mean, of course. Sexy, right? Some people would think worse things. And then, some people would think something else I guess, I don't know, this is ridiculous, Min, I have no opinion."

....

"What do you think," I said, "and don't say you have no opinion."

Al looked around the room. The music waited. "I guess I think, Min, that when I think about sex, you know, I want it to feel *good*. Not *feel good*, shut up, but *right*. Happy, not just banging away somewhere. You know, you should not just do it to do it. You should love the guy." (Handler 2012: 125-126; original italics)

Among parents, and teachers working with teenagers, I think that the biggest camp in opposition to those who advocate abstinence for religious reasons is a liberal-minded group whose view is represented by Al in both his emphatic 'Is it OK not to be a virgin, *yes*', and his contextualizing speech about the importance of sex feeling '*right*' and of not having sex merely in order to have had sex. To return to Hollindale's (1988: 28, 29, 30, original italics) distinction between "intended surface ideology" and "*passive* ideology", which reflects the writer's "unexamined assumptions" and "the writer's integration in a society which unthinkingly accepts them", Al's stated views reflect an intended surface ideology that many adults who care about teenagers, who look for a balance

between the two poles of pleasure and danger associated with girls' sexuality, would be happy to see reinforced in YA literature.

But what of the novel's passive ideology, which Hollindale (1988: 30) rightly argues carries more weight because it reflects what is seen as common sense? Al's passive ideology – like that of the novel as a whole – is at odds with the liberal, sex positive views he appears to express. This is revealed in his refusal to consider desire in the determination of when sex feels '*right*', and it is revealed in his equivocations and evasions: his observation that most people are not virgins, which evades the specificity of Min's hesitant question, '*Am I ... is it OK to not be a virgin?*'; his digressions into cars and the nature of 'people'; and his evasive non-answer that 'Different people think different things'. This is subtext that even a very unsophisticated reader can surely understand: he does not want to answer Min's question, because he does not know how to answer it in a way that will be both true and kind. His shock at the idea that Min might 'fool around' in a park – 'Jesus, Min' – makes his disapproval clear. He distances himself subtly but definitely from boys who like it when girls are sexually intimate with them – especially in cars or parks – when he says, 'Some guys like it, I guess', with the implication that he has to guess because he is not one of these guys. 'I mean, of course' further distances him by implying that this is something he recognizes through a process of logical thought, not through the instant familiarity of identification. The question in '*Sexy, right?*' suggests that he is in no way sure that it is in fact sexy at all. And 'I have no opinion' has been established early and repeatedly in the novel as the thing that Al says when he has negative opinions that he wishes to avoid expressing. Evidently, Al is among those people who

‘would think worse things’. His unmindful conditioned recoil at the thought of Min’s sexuality and desire may indeed spark that instant familiarity of identification that he himself dismisses (when he says, ‘I mean, of course’) in many readers subject to the same passive ideology as that of the book, or the culture from which it springs.

Doubtless Al, and Handler, and the reviewers and awards panels who have praised Handler’s novel, may genuinely agree with Al’s explicitly expressed view that sex is ‘OK’. Yet what Al communicates (to Min, and more importantly to Handler’s readers) is not merely that a certain kind of sex – considered, loving sex – may be acceptable and proper. It is also that most other kinds of sex – particularly sex in cars or parks, or indeed any kind of sex that might be characterized as ‘banging away somewhere’, and any sex involving Min and Ed specifically – are to be categorized with ill-considered, unloving sex as both unacceptable and improper. And it is that questions of desire have no place in discussions of good reasons to have sex, and good kinds of sex to have. What Al communicates may be expected to carry particular weight with readers, both because he is characterized as likeable – loyal, witty, vulnerable and forgiving – and because he is positioned for readers to like: by implication, as Min’s future and true love interest. Al thus serves to reinforce and further normalize, with some heft, a passive ideology that readers will already be familiar with from their own life experience. This passive ideology is quite significantly less sex positive than Al’s expressed views, or than the views that might be claimed by many parents, teachers, book reviewers, and other adults who sincerely oppose abstinence education and chastity culture for teenagers. Rather, it is an ideology

that shames Min, and Handler's readers, for sexual desires and activities that are really very ordinary, especially given the limited access to private spaces afforded to most middle-class teenagers. Furthermore, it is an ideology that is fundamental to chastity culture both in its denigration of girls' desire and in its doom-laden message about relationships between boys and girls.

### **A mandate for distrust, disconnection, disembodiment**

The novel has many literary signs of impending doom, such as the wineglass that will inevitably be shattered, and the many mysterious and worrying feelings that Min ignores: "the kitchen felt so strange that I just pushed on through, kept talking.... I had a feeling, but I did not know what it was" (Handler 2012: 113), she says, and "I did not know what was going on that I was feeling" (Handler 2012: 113-114). Of concrete warning signs, however, there are few. Min's friends do not like Ed, but they also do not know him. Ed's speech patterns are filled with casual homophobia, but he tries to change this when Min criticizes it. The only other thing that might warn Min, or Handler's readers, against Ed is the negative stereotype of arrogance, stupidity and one-dimensionality associated with what Min calls his "grunty jock crowd" (Handler 2012: 13) and his status as a popular school basketball star – "Ed Slaterton, jocky hero, handsome in the student newspaper and star of a million strands of gossip" (Handler 2012: 87) – stereotypes that Ed, in fact, undermines by being a finalist for a mathematics prize (Handler 2012: 37) as well as, for that matter, by choosing to date Min.

Ed has many former girlfriends, but there is no reason that this should necessarily make him a bad boyfriend. It might perhaps mean that Min is naive for having thought that their relationship would last. Describing the motel where she sees herself as having lost her virginity, Min imagines the scene as a still photograph in a book of cinema history and writes: “‘Establishing shot,’ is what the caption would say, ‘from *The Moron Who Thought Love Was Forever*’”. But there are in fact good reasons for her to have thought that her and Ed’s love might last for some time. She is very different from Ed’s usual type of girlfriend, so it is not unrealistic for her to suppose that because their relationship is exceptional for him in one way, it might also be exceptional in others. In addition, the reactions of Ed’s good friends Annette and Trevor, and even of Ed’s likeable sister, Joan, cannot but give her hope. When she tells Annette her fears about Ed – “He’s mine now but ... someone could take him. I’m like an outsider to everyone else he knows (Handler 2012: 158) – Annette says “No.... He loves you” (Handler 2012: 158). When Min asks Trevor what Ed says about her, Trevor responds “instantly, without embarrassment” (Handler 2012: 165):

“That he loves you.... That you passed the test with his sister. That you put up with his math thing. That you’re planning a weird movie-star party and that I have to get the fucking *champagne* or he’ll kick my ass. And you don’t let him say *gay* anymore, which is – can I say *gay*?” (Handler 2012: 165)

And when Min jokingly suggests about Ed that she might be able to “whip him into shape” (Handler 2012: 77), Joan says, more seriously, “Oh Min, I hope so” (Handler 2012: 77). Annette is, in fact, sexually involved with Ed, but Min has no way of knowing this, and no reason to doubt what she says. And, indeed, Annette does tell Min the truth as she knows it; she must be acutely aware that Ed loves

Min, because that is presumably why he is not dating Annette. Trevor's knowledge of so many little details of Min's relationship with Ed clearly implies that he has Ed's confidence, and he has no reason to lie to her about Ed's love. Similarly Joan's hope for Min and Ed surely implies that she sees a future for them as, at least, possible. Any reasonable person in Min's situation might place the same faith in Ed that Min does.

A comparison is yet again illuminating. In his *Telegraph* review, Martin Chilton (2012: n.p.), a middle-aged Culture Editor with, according to his LinkedIn profile, a Master of Arts degree in American Literature and History from the University of London, writes: "You fear a deceitful heart is at play from the very start of Daniel Handler's novel". By contrast, in a review on the now-archived *Guardian* children's book site, which features book reviews posted by children and teenagers, a reviewer called Tjala (2013: n.p.) writes of Ed and Min: "Their relationship appeared perfect, and I had absolutely no idea why they had broken up until the very end, until the last shattering moment: the real reason". Tjala, like Min, is an articulate teenager, and Tjala, like Min, has reasonable grounds for her trust in Ed, misplaced though this trust turns out to be. She explains:

I also like Ed even though he turned out to be not what we thought, throughout the majority of the book; he was mostly sweet and considerate. I would be really interested to hear the story through his point of view, whether he ever really loved Min or was just pretending, whether he regretted what he did or was just selfish. (Tjala 2013: n.p.)

Tjala is not wrong: aside from the cheating that neither Min nor the reader knows about until the end, and the homophobic language that he obediently works on eliminating over the course of the book, Ed really is 'mostly sweet and

considerate'. He makes an effort to spend time with Min's friends, and to introduce her to his. He throws himself wholeheartedly into her birthday party scheme, involving his friends and contributing his own suggestions, which are excellent and appropriate to the spirit of Min's plan. He tries activities that she enjoys with an openness of spirit that makes it easy for him to adopt those that he turns out to enjoy, such as drinking coffee, and even to be good company during those that he does not, such as live jazz performances. It appears to be important to him to satisfy her sexual desires, not merely his own: he is "patient with [his] fingers and [his] mouth" and manages to do with her "what no boy could ever pull off because no boy asked so sweet and happily for help", so that the orgasms Min experiences with him are "terrific and gasping" (Handler 2012: 132).

Chilton's fear of a 'deceitful heart' is thus founded not on clear warning signs that would be recognizable to any reasonable person in real life, but rather on narrative and generic cues that depend for recognition on a certain level of reading and/or film viewing experience. The story of the quirky girl who falls for a popular but perfidious jock is such a trite theme that, for an experienced reader or filmgoer, such as Chilton, the mere fact that a quirky girl has fallen for a popular jock is sufficient to signify that the boy must be a suspect character. Similarly, an experienced reader or filmgoer, such as Chilton, might question whether Annette is really as peripheral a character as she initially seems to be, given how many cameo appearances she makes in a thin novel with very few significant characters. But it is more or less untrained, inexperienced and amateur teenage readers, such as Tjala, rather than trained, experienced and

professional adult readers, such as Chilton, who are the target audience for Handler's novel. Naturally, teenagers vary; I am not suggesting that Tjala's reading stands for all teenagers' readings. But it is considerably more likely to be somewhat representative of them than is Chilton's.

What might readers learn from more untrained, inexperienced, amateur readings? Like readers of *Twilight*, many teenage readers of *Why We Broke Up* (Handler 2012) may read too well to be tractably subjected to the intended surface ideology of the novel – in this case, a more liberal one than that of *Twilight* – but may instead read just well enough to absorb the unintended passive ideology, which is centred on shaming teenagers, and particularly teenage girls, for their sexual desires and pleasures. Furthermore, if teenage readers recognize the quirky girl/popular jock trope, their untrained but not unintelligent readings of the novel might reinforce the stereotypes as well as, with them, a perception that we should judge people according to superficial appearances and stereotypes, and might support a prejudice against mixing socially or romantically with people from different social spheres. Worse still, for readers too inexperienced to recognize the trope that Chilton's reading relies on, the novel would seem to suggest simply that girls should never trust, or risk either physical or emotional intimacy with, anybody they have not known for years. Either way, the novel implies that girls would do well to divorce the desires of their bodies from their sexual activities, and may expect to be punished by betrayal, humiliation, or heartbreak, if they make their sexual decisions on the basis of their embodied sexual desires.

These are messages that do not sit comfortably with the professed sex positivity of more liberal-minded parents, teachers, book reviewers and awards panels who oppose abstinence education and chastity culture, or with the actual sex positivity of much of the unintended, passive ideology of *Twilight*. Rather, they are messages that support what Janet Holland et al. (1994: 24) call the “disembodied sexuality” of passive femininity, in which, according to Deborah L. Tolman (2002a: 21) a girl “disconnects the apprehending psychic part of herself from what is happening in her own body”, making her “especially vulnerable to the power of others’ feelings as well as to what others say she does and does not want or feel” (see Chapter Two). Additionally, they are messages that resonate with the intended surface ideology of *Twilight*, and with many of the tenets of chastity culture: girls should relinquish their bodily and sexual decisions to others, avoid mixing socially with those outside the (church) community, never trust boys because they are only after one thing, avoid emotional intimacy for fear it will lead to physical intimacy, and avoid physical intimacy outside marriage – in other words, for most teenagers, for years.

### **An ideology of shame**

The abstinence education favoured within chastity culture, as Michelle Fine and Sara I. McClelland (2006: 306) point out, “lodges sexuality education in fear and shame, firmly burying discussions of desire and pleasure”. Similarly, Min herself appears to be unable to avoid burying discussions of desire and pleasure in fear and shame. She does experience pleasure with Ed (including but not limited to

her ‘terrific and gasping’ orgasms). And she certainly feels a sexual and embodied desire for him, for example when thinking ahead to a weekend when they will be sufficiently free of family supervision to have privacy for her first experience of penetrative penile-vaginal sex, about which anticipation she writes: “right then I wanted to, an eager hunger in my mouth and my lap” (Handler 2012: 150). Laughing and excited as she kicks off her shoes when this carefully-planned occasion finally arrives, she is similarly hungry again, and recognizes that the “fondness and mischief and lust” that light Ed’s eyes are not only *for* her but also *like* her own (Handler 2012: 192).

But the shame and fear of discovery that Min associates with her desire and pleasure are sufficiently overwhelming that, performing the resistance to female sexual desire of sexually passive femininity, she avoids confronting her own desire. Instead, she denies a degree of agency in her sexuality and her relationship with Ed – a boy who, despite his faults, is gentle and submissive, and makes it clear in both his words and his actions that it is Min who must decide whether, when, and how quickly they become physically more intimate. It is Min who first brings up the question of penetrative penile-vaginal sex, saying that she is not sure if she wants to do it with Ed or not; Ed’s sincere reaction is, “Whoa, we don’t have to” (Handler 2012: 110). Min feels pressure because Ed’s friends are very different from hers, and the celebratory bonfire parties they attend after winning basketball games are believed to be hotbeds of sex, but Ed reassures her that bonfires are mostly “all talk” (Handler 2012: 110). Nevertheless, as Ed wins a basketball game, she describes herself as “waving my flag like a hostage” (Handler 2012: 79). She goes with him to a bonfire party, and continues:

What else could I do? There was no choice, as far as I could think. You won the game, we won the game, the party afterward, the drinking, the big blaze, and finally alone someplace too late, I had no choice, not from the moment I first saw this flag fly. I had no choice. (Handler 2012: 80)

The 'someplace' in which she is 'finally alone' with Ed 'too late' is the car that so shocks Al's sensibilities. Implicitly, she suggests that they are there too late for a boy and girl to be alone together without sexual activity, and thus perhaps too late for her to have a choice about such sexual activity. These suggestions are in line both with the rule (common within chastity culture) that a teenager should avoid the temptation to have sex by avoiding being alone with a person of a different sex in a car at night, and with the belief (fundamental to rape culture) that there is a behavioural point beyond which a girl can neither legitimately nor realistically refuse sex.

But the reality of this experience – as she herself describes it – is one of mutuality and pleasure, rather than force or even pressure. She feels the need to deny her own agency at this point precisely because of her desire for and active participation in what she does, and the shame engendered in her by desire and an engaged and active sexuality. She writes:

We got to Steve's car. This is another thing I think of, turning it over, try to put together two pictures of it, but this time it's about me, it's myself I'm trying to figure. Because one picture sounds so disgusting I'm not even able to tell Al about it, win the big game, take the virgin to her first bonfire, feed her a beer or two, and the two of us in someone's car with your hand between my legs, unbuttoned and hiked down and the noises I made, before I finally, gasping, stopped you. It sounds terrible and it's probably the truth, the real picture, gross when I write it down and shamed about it. But it's the real, whole truth I'm trying to get down, how it happened, and honestly it felt different then, different from that bad picture. I can see it, so gentle the way you moved, the thrill

that was there with us as no one knew where we were or what we were doing. It was different, Ed, and beautiful how we moved and touched, not just two kids fooling around like it would look in a movie. Even now that is the one I try to see, not just the kissing and the clothing and the quiet, taut, and awkward afterward, wondering how late it was, thanking the gods for no cruel laughing knock on the window. Not just that, but the things I can't see, can't bear to, and the things I didn't see until I finally got home and turned on the bathroom light, first to look at my reflection and then at my strange hand hurting with odd, skinny bruises on my palm, sore, almost breaking the skin. I can feel them now almost..., the marks left from the way my hand clenched so tight and ragged with breath and wild joy in the back of that car....  
(Handler 2012: 89-90)

This discussion initially maintains the suggestion that Min lacks agency: 'win the big game, take the virgin to her first bonfire, feed her a beer or two'. That which 'sounds so disgusting' is presented as being driven by Ed: Min distances herself from the lead-up to sexual activity by writing suddenly from Ed's perspective and referring to herself in the third person. And she presents Ed as all-powerful, with his winning of the game, his familiarity with the bonfire parties to which Min is new, his sexual knowledge in implied opposition to her virginity, his position as both host and dispenser of alcohol, the hint of the masterful in 'feed'. The active verbs are Ed's; Min is implicitly passive, and in the passive, one who *is taken* and *is fed*. The linguistic mechanisms are different, but Min is here reminiscent of the many girls in Thompson's (1990: 343; see Chapter Two) study who describe their first experiences of sex by: "dropping predicates and leaving passive sentences dangling as if under a posthypnotic suggestion to suppress. 'It was something that just happened,' they say finally...." Min thus presents herself as a model of sexually passive femininity, with the appropriately passive lack of autonomy over her own body and denial of her own sexual desire.

When she describes ‘the real, whole truth’ of the night, however, she appears to have far greater bodily autonomy and sexual desire, and to present their interaction as one of mutuality in both feeling and action. Ed has the first active verb in this part of her description – ‘moved’ – but rather than compelling her he is ‘so gentle’. As Min describes ‘the thrill that was there with us as no one knew where we were or what we were doing’, she suggests three things: a shared feeling or mutual pleasure in shutting out the world and devoting themselves only to each other; the tingling, throbbing, shuddering physical responses to their sexual desire and arousal suggested in the definitions of ‘thrill’ as a “subtle nervous tremor caused by intense emotion or excitement (as pleasure, fear, etc.), producing a slight shudder or tingling through the body” (OED), and as “a vibration, throbbing, tremor” (OED); and an assumption that Ed, to whom she is writing a month later, will remember this shared thrill in the same way she does – that the mutuality of their desire was sufficiently powerful to remain in Ed’s mind even after all that has passed between them since. Min continues to represent her participation as mutual and active when she writes of the beauty of ‘how we moved and touched’. And she ends the passage by moving her focus entirely away from Ed and towards her own pleasure, and the physical marks of that pleasure and her ‘wild joy’ in satisfying her desire for Ed.

It is clear that Min’s need for a narrative of passive femininity does not come from any actual passivity or lack of agency. Rather, it comes from shame about her own desire. Girls perform a passive femininity not to deny their sexual activity, but to deny responsibility for it; ‘It just happened’ is, after all, a narrative that makes no attempt to deny that a girl has had sex. Shame is at the heart of the

false dichotomy of the ‘two pictures’ Min has in her mind of this scene. First, she creates the disparity between the ‘disgusting’, ‘terrible’, ‘gross’, ‘shamed’ picture of a celebration, some beer, and in the rare privacy of a car ‘your hand between my legs, unbuttoned and hiked down and the noises I made, before I finally, gasping, stopped you’; and the alternative picture – ‘different from that bad picture’ and ‘gentle’, and ‘beautiful how we moved and touched, not just two kids fooling around’ – of the bruises from her ‘hand clenched so tight and ragged with breath and wild joy’. Then, she elides the sex positivity of her vision of her own sexual joy and pleasure as beautiful by imposing over the beauty of sex the beauty of tenderness. I simply do not believe that one bruises one’s own palm from the overwhelming ragged breath and wild joy of the gentleness and beauty of one’s moving and touching; I think that one breathes raggedly and clenches one’s hand tightly enough to bruise in the wild joy and the ‘noises’ and ‘gasping’ of pleasure and satisfied desire. But it is crucial for Min to separate sex and tenderness, and to cover her images of sexual desire, pleasure and satisfaction with those of loving tenderness, because her shame (a shame reinforced when she looks at her reflection in the bathroom after the fact and is presumably forced, as usual, to contemplate the difference between lover and slut) will not allow her to accept either that there might be beauty in the sounds and sights of sexual arousal or ecstasy, or that there might be meaning in something that she does not regard as particularly aesthetically beautiful.

It is telling that the image she directly opposes to that of beauty is that of ‘just two kids fooling around’: the casual, deprecating dismissiveness of ‘just’ and ‘fooling around’ suggest that sex can only be ‘beautiful’ if it is serious and

important and penetrative. This perspective returns us to the values of chastity culture, in which sex is to be avoided specifically because it is too serious and important to take lightly.<sup>24</sup> Much like Al's views on what constitutes appropriate, considered, loving sex and what does not, this passage draws a line between sex that is disgusting and terrible and gross and shameful, and sex that is beautiful and different from that bad picture, and places sex involving Min and Ed, sex in cars, sex in private places carved out from within public spaces, sex with jeans around one's ankles, sex while under the influence of alcohol, sex that is anything other than always and entirely gentle, sex that involves activities other than penile-vaginal penetration – in fact, most sex had by teenagers – on the side of shame. On the other side of the line it places Min's wild orgasmic joy, in a way that affects to celebrate her *jouissance*, but actually suggests that this *jouissance* is only worthy of celebration if it is not, in fact, a *jouissance* at all, but rather a wild, unbridled spasm of tender beauty. As in Al's discussion of sex and virginity, the apparent intended surface ideology of liberal sex positivity in this passage is violently undercut by the far more influential passive ideology of shame relating to girls' desire and pleasure that runs through it, and through Handler's novel as a whole.

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<sup>24</sup> It is ironic, although not funny, that if Min were able to see more beauty or importance in 'fooling around' with Ed, and to see his hand between her legs as less terrible and disgusting and gross and shameful, she might feel less urgency about having serious, important penile-vaginal penetrative intercourse with him.

## Consequences of an ideology of shame

The emotional climax of the novel is a single extended paragraph of utterly despairing self-loathing and castigation that follows the discovery of Ed's deceit, and reveals the passionate intensity with which Min feels this shame. Lengthy as it is, I quote Min's hyperbolic two-page assault on herself almost in its entirety, because the unbroken and uninterrupted length of the paragraph is one of the stylistic features that is used to convey the overwhelming, crushing nature of her shame and disgust at herself, and that causes the paragraph to loom relentlessly over the brief remainder of the novel, dominating the final impression with which the reader is left:

And the truth is that I'm *not*, Ed, is what I wanted to tell you. I'm not different. I'm not arty like everyone says who doesn't know me, I don't paint, I can't draw, I play no instrument, I can't sing. I'm not in plays, I wanted to say, I don't write poems. I can't dance except tipsy at dances. I'm not athletic, I'm not a goth or a cheerleader, I'm not treasurer or co-captain. I'm not gay and out and proud, I'm not that kid from Sri Lanka, not a triplet, a prep, a drunk, a genius, a hippie, a Christian, a slut, not even one of those super-Jewish girls with a yarmulke gang wishing everyone a happy Sukkoth. I'm not anything, this is what I realized to Al crying .... I like movies, everyone knows I do – I love them – but I will never be in charge of one because my ideas are stupid and wrong in my head. There's nothing different about that, nothing fascinating, interesting, worth looking at. I have bad hair and stupid eyes. I have a body that's nothing. I'm too fat and my mouth is idiotic ugly. My clothes are a joke, my jokes are desperate and complicated and nobody else laughs. I talk like a moron, I can't say one thing to talk to people that makes them like me, I just babble and sputter like a drinking fountain broken. My mother hates me, I can't please her. My dad never calls and then calls at the wrong time and sends big gifts or nothing, and all of it makes me scowl at him, and he named me Minerva. I talk shit about everybody and then sulk when they don't call me, my friends fall away like I've dropped them out of an airplane, my ex-boyfriend thinks I'm Hitler when he sees me. I scratch at places on my body, I sweat everywhere, my arms, the way I clumsy around dropping things, my average grades and stupid interests, bad breath, pants tight in

back, my neck too long or something. I'm sneaky and get caught, I'm snobby and faking it, I agree with liars, I say whatnot and think that's some clever thing. I have to be watched when I cook so I don't burn it down. I can't run four blocks or fold a sweater. I make out like an imbecile, I fool around foolishly, I lost my virginity and couldn't even do that right, agreeing to it and getting sad and annoying afterward, clinging to a boy everyone knows is a jerk bastard asshole prick, loving him like I'm fucking twelve and learning the whole of life from a smiley magazine. I love like a fool, like a Z-grade off-brand romantic comedy, a loon in too much makeup saying things in an awkward script to a handsome man with his own canceled comedy show. I'm not a romantic, I'm a half-wit. Only stupid people would think I'm smart. I'm not something anyone should know. I'm a lunatic wandering around for scraps, I'm like every single miserable moron I've scorned and pretended I didn't recognize. I'm all of them, every last ugly thing in a bad last-minute costume. I'm not different, not at all, not different from any other speck of a thing. I'm a blemished blemish, a ruined ruin, a stained wreck so failed I can't see what I used to be. I'm nothing, not a single thing. The only particle I had, the only tiny thing raising me up, is that I was Ed Slaterton's girlfriend, loved by you for like ten secs, and who cares, so what, and not anymore so how embarrassing for me. How wrong to think I was anyone else, like thinking grass stains make you a beautiful view, like thinking kissed makes you kissable, like feeling warm makes you coffee, like liking movies makes you a director. How utterly incorrect to think it any other way, a box of crap is treasures, a boy smiling means it, a gentle moment is a life improved. It's not, it isn't, catastrophic to think so, a pudgy toddler in a living room dreaming of ballerinas, a girl in bed star-eyed over *Never by Candlelight*, a nut thinking she is loved following a stranger in the street. (Handler 2012: 218-220).

Min's rapidly diminishing clarity and articulacy reflect her rapid emotional breakdown. Because the novel seems, as I have discussed, to validate stereotypes as meaningful measures of a person, the long list of stereotypes that fail to apply to Min positions her as lacking any identity that might make her noteworthy, or even visible, either to others or to herself. This denial of self is given weight through its cumulative effect, and the theme of lack of identity recurs at intervals throughout the paragraph. 'I'm not anything', she concludes at the end of her catalogue of the identities that she does not possess. She de-individualizes and

dehumanizes herself further when she says, 'I'm not something anyone should know', and when she compares herself to 'any other speck of a thing'. Finally, devastatingly, she reiterates, 'I'm nothing, not a single thing'. She suggests further dehumanization in her inarticulate statement: 'I scratch at places on my body, I sweat everywhere, my arms, the way I clumsy around dropping things'. And she represents herself as physically repulsive when she says that she is 'too fat' and has 'bad hair and stupid eyes', 'a body that's nothing', a mouth that is 'idiotic ugly', 'bad breath' and a 'neck too long or something' – none of which are extreme or revolting in themselves, but all of which she uses cumulatively to suggest a bizarre and vile physicality. In addition to insisting on a gross and dehumanized body, she also characterizes her mind as inadequate: her ideas are 'stupid and wrong', she talks 'like a moron', her interests are 'stupid', she is 'a half-wit' and 'a lunatic wandering around for scraps', too incompetent even to cook without starting a fire. 'Only stupid people', she says, would think that she is 'smart'. And she combines her weak intellect with a repellent character when she writes: 'I can't say one thing to talk to people that makes them like me', and 'I'm like every single miserable moron I've scorned and pretended I didn't recognize.' She represents herself, similarly, as an unpleasant person in her claims to 'talk shit about everybody and then sulk when they don't call' her, to be 'sneaky and get caught', to be 'snobby and faking it', to 'agree with liars' and, finally and again devastatingly, to be 'all of them, every last ugly thing'.

Although Min says that one of the many things she is not is a slut, in fact her overwhelming sense that she is soiled and irreparably damaged – 'a blemished blemish, a ruined ruin, a stained wreck so failed I can't see what I used to be' –

recall the sexual shame of her earlier comment that she is “Doomed like a wineglass knowing it’ll get dropped someday, shoes that’ll be scuffed in no time, the new shirt you’ll soon enough muck up filthy” (Handler 2012: 49), and of the dirt that she wipes from her neck before contemplating the difference between lover and slut. Like these earlier images of doom and of dirt, her insistence that she is blemished, stained and ruined suggests that, despite her protestations, she does in fact regard – and shame – herself as a slut. She compares her own wrongness to ‘thinking grass stains make you a beautiful view’, an allusion to the ‘lovely lilty green light’ in the park with Ed, and to the “leaf bits and blades of grass” (Handler 2012: 108) on her skin afterwards, that utterly repudiates her memory of the loveliness of that place and of the pleasure and the satisfaction of desire that she experienced in it. What she used to be and can no longer see due to the extent of what she regards as her general failure of personhood is a virgin. She sees her body as blemished, ruined and stained, and her mind as imbecilic, foolish and incompetent, because of the shame and humiliation that lead her to say, ‘I make out like an imbecile, I fool around foolishly, I lost my virginity and couldn’t even do that right’.

She despises her character because, as she sees it: “The only particle I had, the only tiny thing raising me up, is that I was Ed Slaterton’s girlfriend, loved by [Ed] for like ten secs, and who cares, so what, and not anymore so how embarrassing for me.’ By giving Ed (as she has elsewhere in the novel) this power to place her in the passive and to define her, she leaves herself no logical conclusion but that if she is no longer loved by Ed she must not be lovable; if she is no longer kissed by Ed she must not be ‘kissable’; if her life story is no longer about Ed then her

story, and her life, must be a ‘Z-grade, off-brand’ comedy, a poorly-executed and unamusing joke. And in her view the fault, as the novel has implied throughout, is hers. Despite the absence of clear indications that Ed would disappoint her, she must be stupid, moronic, half-witted, lunatic not to have known better than to trust and desire and have sex with him. It is she who is ‘utterly incorrect’ to have thought that ‘a boy smiling means it’, rather than the boy who is utterly incorrect to have smiled while betraying her. It is she who is ‘a nut thinking she is loved’, rather than Ed who is ‘every last ugly thing’ for lying about his love.

This skewed rewriting of what has happened and, more consequentially, of her very self, reflects the constant tension in this passage between a sense that she is intrinsically worthless – lacking in body, mind, character, individuation and identity, hated by her mother and let down by her father – and that she is worthless because she is fallen. Blemished, ruined and stained, she clearly does regard herself as sexually fallen, and if she is worthless because she is fallen, then her worthlessness cannot be intrinsic. But in her redistribution of fault, she appears to rewrite herself as having indeed been worthless even before her supposed fall. What this suggests is that what she sees as her fall takes place not when she has sex, but far earlier: when she desires. It is true that her diatribe gestures at the complex ways in which different loci of identity and agency are interwoven, in her and in the ways in which each locus is read and influences the readings of all the others, within the various cultures that shape and define her. And it is true that desire is only one of these loci, chastity culture only one of

these cultures.<sup>25</sup> But desire is the locus and chastity culture, with the shame it apportions to girls' desire, is the culture that suggests an explanation for the tension that Min betrays between intrinsic worthlessness and fallenness. The novel thus presents Min's excoriating self-dehumanization, her shame at her body, mind, and character, all as inextricably tied to her desire, because all form part of the punishment for that desire. Crippling shame and hatred of self, the novel implies, are what a girl is to expect among the irreparable consequences of falling into desire.

The novel ends with a vision of hope for Min's future. She writes: "I'll feel that way soon, any sec now, friends or loved or content or whatnot. I can see it. I can see it smiling" (Handler 2012: 231). Part of what is smiling is likely the future of her relationship with Al. Al reveals his long-time love for her while she is dating Ed (Handler 2012: 208). By the end of the novel she and Al are planning, in contrast and (disquietingly) parallel to the "elegant affair" (Handler 2012: 214) dreamed up in honour of Lottie Carson's eighty-ninth birthday, an "elegant supper" for New Year, "in honour," they decide "after a lot of caffeinated talk talk talk about it, of nobody" (Handler 2012: 230). At this point Min frames her future hopes with reference to a film in which she admires, among other things, "the way the love interest sneaks up on you, several scenes before you even know for sure he's in the story" (Handler 2012: 231).

But the slight hope of true love and a boyfriend in Al that is implied by this film

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<sup>25</sup> A proper consideration of the remaining loci and cultures, and of the interactions between them, is beyond the scope of this chapter.

and by their party planning is insufficient to overcome the novel's overwhelming passive ideology of shame in desire. While Min has admitted to herself that it "probably" would have mattered to her if she had known that Al was in love with her (Handler 2012: 208), her relationship with and feelings for him are companionate rather than sexual, and there is no sign anywhere that she feels the slightest desire for, or even attraction to, him. She may well have sex with him: after all their years of friendship he does presumably fulfil his own criterion that she should love the boy she has sex with. And he seems to have his family home to himself quite often, so there would probably be no need for any undignified "banging away somewhere" (Handler 2012: 126), such as in a car or park. But if a relationship with Al is Min's hope of happiness, then the reason it is allowed to fill this role is that Al arouses none of the "eager hunger" (Handler 2012: 150) in her mouth or her lap that she has felt for Ed. With Al as her boyfriend, the complexities and contradictions of her performance of sexually passive femininity will be minimized. Happiness with him will comprehensively silence the desires that she has so far tried merely to cover.

The suggestion of future happiness with Al is also too slight, and comes too late, to transcend the distressing emotional climax that precedes it. Slut shaming and body shaming herself, ashamed of her mind and her character, Min thoroughly undermines in advance her expressed expectation of feeling 'friends or loved or content or whatnot' at some point in the future. Kerry Mallan (2017: 173) sees Min as "a character whose creative imagination provides her with the means for making a choice and developing a renewed and independent subjectivity", but while Min does indeed have the means, I would argue that she does not make the

choice to develop a renewed and independent subjectivity. There is no suggestion that either her creative imagination and filmic knowledge, or the more facile possibility of happiness with Al, cause her to change her shameful and hateful view of herself. Rather, bleakly, one might wonder whether, without any sense of value or even identity in her own right as an individual, Min now seeks value and an identity in being Al's girlfriend, as she previously did in being Ed's. Tellingly, Min's harsh judgement on herself is neither retracted, nor contextualized, nor reconsidered in the brief remainder of the novel. Its cumulative hyperbole should be either comical for the reader or cathartic for Min, but there is no moment of bathos to undercut and expose its folly, or of release and relief for Min (and the reader). Instead it is simply allowed to swell and swell, to dominate and overpower all the overt sex positive arguments in the novel, to determine the final impression left on the reader, and to expose and clarify definitively the passive ideology of shame in girls' desire and sexuality that is expressed covertly throughout the novel.

Beneath its literary veneer, *Why We Broke Up* is a very simple story, about a girl who desires, satisfies her desires, and is viciously and disproportionately punished with betrayal, humiliation, and debilitating shame and self-hatred: an exemplary fictional case study in the harmful psychological effects purported, within chastity culture and abstinence education, to follow on sexual activity outside marriage. Nearly 40 years after the publication of *Forever* (Blume [1975] 2005), this is remarkably ironic.

## **THE WRONG COUNTRY FOR DESIRE**

## ***Girl Re-Membered***

*My parents were white, middle class, reasonably wealthy and, by fortunate chance, gentle with each other and with me. I was both lucky and privileged, and as a result I had an extremely sheltered, extremely protected childhood and youth. This is what that looked like in South Africa in the last decades before democracy.*

*I never knew police raids or brutality. I never knew anyone who died in detention. I never saw a necklacing. I knew a couple of conmen and white collar criminals but I never met a tsotsi, either socially or in his professional capacity. I was, as I say, lucky: I was never hurt or frightened by any of my family or friends.*

*Nevertheless, my world was saturated with violence and the threat of violence.*

*In primary school, it was always important to recognize which siren was for fire drills and which for riot drills, and to remember for which you ran outside and for which you leopard crawled to shelter indoors, or behind a wall. My excellent school trained me well enough that, to this day, I feel a compulsion to report any unattended bag in a public place to someone in authority, and to keep clear in case it explodes. I didn't know this until I did it, but I can distinguish the sounds of fireworks or a backfiring car from that of a bomb; they are quite different.*

*After we had watched my mother's car being stolen from our front lawn, I remember a young policeman asking whether we had a gun, and telling us repeatedly, insistently, urgently, unprompted, that we would be perfectly within*

*our legal rights to shoot to kill if we should ever see something similar again. As it happened, we did have a gun (of course we had a gun). When my father was away, my mother replaced him in bed with a small cream and metallic grey pistol under his pillow, just in case. She woke me once in the night, to push me under my bed as a neighbour, shooting, chased an intruder through our garden under my window.*

*Now, I think these things are insane. Then, some of them seemed normal, some perhaps a little odd.*

*One time, an uncle came to live with us for a while as he tried to put his life back together after his two years fighting in Angola. That seemed entirely normal (unlike him). Young men went to the army, and while they were there and for a while after they came back, they were a bit different. That was how it was, and I don't think I questioned it at the time. A few years later, of course, I celebrated when compulsory military service was abolished just a few months before my boyfriend would have been called up.*

*A trickle-down effect was inevitable. Both in primary and in high school, boys took a certain pride in being caned. There was a swagger to the way they named and drew on Jaws, Mr Steyn's favourite short thick plank, and an edge of respect to the recognition that Mr Cook knew how to do the job properly, and was to be taken seriously. The teachers who weren't senior enough to be allowed to hit boys or confident enough to break the rules, or who believed in gender equity, had their own methods. Mrs van Vuuren pinched us or pulled our hair unless we had agreed in writing at the beginning of the year that we would prefer detention instead. Mr*

*Botha made one present a forefinger, like a cartoon dog's bone, for him to take into his wet mouth and bite, hard. Coming from a nonviolent home, I never saw any of this as normal, not for a moment. But the boys seemed to love Jaws, and Mr Botha must have been doing something that was seen as right: he left our school because he was made principal of another.*

*What I'm trying to say is that, growing up as sheltered and protected as a South African child can be, I knew all about violence and all about fear. They were normal and normative. In fact I think that sometimes, like those schoolboys getting caned, we South Africans – many of us – take a certain perverse pride in living with the violence with which we do; it's our 'thing', it's what makes us unique and special and strong. This is a coping mechanism, I assume, but not one that I think should take the place, for teenagers, of more normal and – in my opinion – more appropriately normative teenage preoccupations and pursuits, like desire and sex.*

*Because, even steeped in violent context, even in South Africa, there's no intrinsic connection between violence and desire. I knew about violence, and the fear of violence, years before I knew about desire, and fear of violence has absolutely and always shaped my responses to desire. But my desire – as you will have seen – nevertheless insisted on its right to exist; in fact it flourished. Desire is its own distinct feeling. Even steeped in violent context, even in South Africa, desire insists on its own distinct existence.*

*(I have a sense that I might not think it necessary to make these points if I weren't South African.)*

## Chapter Five

### A Violent Literature: YA Fiction in South Africa

Unlike the US and UK, South Africa has no tradition of English-language young adult (YA) writing about sexuality. Judith Inggs (2016: 65, 69) correctly states: “Works exploring adolescent sexuality are relatively few in South Africa”, and she argues that in South African YA books in English that focus specifically on sexual activity, “the emphasis is on the negative consequences of such activity, and the novels serve as a warning to adolescent readers.” Inggs (2016) examines a particularly didactic set of such novels, several published not long after the advent of democracy in 1994. But even among the few more recent and less overtly didactic local publications that engage with sex and sexuality, I cannot fault her conclusion. In fact, I would argue that South African YA authors who work in English are developing, instead of a tradition of writing about sexuality, a tradition of writing about violence, and in the process are linking girls’ desire, in the rare novels in which they engage with it, indissociably with that violence.

There is little recent local YA writing in which girls’ desires significantly shape either plot or character. Where such desires are significant they are mostly ambivalent, evaded, hinted at, skirted around – touched on so lightly that a hurried reader might miss them – but the books in which they appear are invariably set in contexts of pervasive violence, and quite consistently include lengthy, detailed descriptions of the violence their heroines either suffer or

themselves inflict. Min's psychological punishment for desire, in *Why We Broke Up* (Handler 2011), is gentle in comparison to the violent treatment of desiring South African YA heroines. As I will show in this chapter, girls' desire is an even more surely missing discourse, and pleasure and desire are subordinated to danger that far more consistently takes the form of actual violence, in local than in international YA fiction.

The texts that I discuss differ in some ways, but have one key factor in common. *Dark Poppy's Demise*, by SA Partridge (2011), won the 2012 MER Prize for best youth novel, and Partridge was named one of the *Mail & Guardian's* 200 Young South Africans of 2011 for her contribution to South African literature. Her novel is a thriller about a straight, middle-class white girl. Adeline Radloff's (2010) *Sidekick*, which won the 2009 Sanlam Prize for Youth Literature, is a superhero mystery with another straight, middle-class white heroine, in this case one with an adoptive mother that she describes as "coloured" (Radloff 2010: 39). Sonwabiso Ngcowa's (2014) *In Search of Happiness* is the realist story of an impoverished rural black lesbian girl who moves to a large township, Masiphumelele; Ngcowa's novel has been translated into German. And Lily Herne's (2011; 2012; 2013) Mall Rats series, a post-apocalyptic zombie war story with a racially ambiguous straight heroine who moves from a rural area to an urban ghetto, has received considerable critical attention, presumably because of its commercial and overseas success. These texts make up more than half of the South African YA fiction so far published this millenium in which a teenage heroine's desire significantly shapes plot or character. The unity, across genres, socio-economic settings, and heroines' sexual preferences, of their

message that girls' desire cannot be separated from violence is striking, as is the fact that all the novels but one – not incidentally, that of the lesbian heroine – represent desire, despite its significance for their heroines, with ambiguity, evasion, and confusion.

### **Desire as invitation to violence: *Dark Poppy's Demise***

In *Dark Poppy's Demise*, by SA Partridge (2011), for example, the sexual desires of the heroine, Jenna – unpopular at school, with a distant father and a mother who has deserted the family – are obfuscated by her social and psychological desires for affection and affirmation. So she thinks about her boyfriend, Robert, “Here was a real, honest-to-goodness stunner of a guy, and he was into me! It didn't really make sense, but then, who can argue with true love?” (Partridge 2011: 37). Here – and elsewhere in the novel – it is impossible to tell whether her desire is rooted in the sexual appeal of Robert's looks; the flattery of being wanted by, or the cachet of being seen with, a “stunner”; or her lonely yearning for “love”. Jenna is quite right that the relationship does not “make sense”, because at this point she has known Robert, who befriends her online, only two days, and she has not yet met him in person. But, confused as they are, her desires lead her to dismiss this non-sense, for which Partridge's punishment is extreme: Jenna is eventually trapped in an abandoned building by Robert and a friend, who turn out to be adult sociopaths who selected and groomed her for rape, torture and long-term captivity or murder. She escapes only after three chapters of vivid brutality and a forcible attempted drowning.

The novel has many parallels with the Twilight saga (Meyer 2005; 2006; 2007; 2008), including the similarity of the names of the two heroines, Jenna and Bella; their irresponsible absent mothers and the inept parenting of their fathers; their tendencies to blush and their heroes' tendencies to carry them around; and the glamorous cars and beautiful secret gardens in which the heroes romance the girls. These parallels might seem to suggest that Jenna's problem is unwise desire, or desire for the wrong person: both Jenna and Bella desire older men who pretend to be high school students, and both ignore the warnings of friends and family against these men, so that Partridge's novel reads like a warning to Twilight fans about where desires such as Bella's lead in the real world.

But while being selected, groomed, captured and tortured by murderous sociopaths, unlike being killed by vampires, is not impossible, it is not an everyday risk, so I would argue that Partridge appears to be luxuriating in the wanton violence of her own writing more than making a credible point about likely dangers. And any such point would, in any case, be a fundamentally hopeless one, in which there is no wise form of girls' desire that can exist independently of violence. Jenna's desire is indeed unwise, but it is not unreasonable of her to believe Robert when he says that he is seventeen years old, and in fact even her friend Anisa, who is suspicious of Robert, does not doubt his age. It is not unreasonable for Jenna to dismiss Anisa's suspicions, since it is quite typical of Anisa to be critical of Jenna and her interests. And it is not even unreasonable for Jenna to ignore the warnings of her father, who is so detached from his daughter that he fails to recognize her when she dyes her hair. Rather than warning against unwise desires, the excess and sensationalism of the

violence that springs from Jenna's very commonplace desires, and an epilogue in which Robert begins grooming a new desiring girl, suggest that not only Jenna's, but any girl's, desires lack wisdom, imply danger, and invite exploitation for violent ends.

### **A silenced discourse of desire: *Sidekick***

Adeline Radloff's (2010) *Sidekick* attempts to open a discourse of desire through its heroine, Katie's, too-frequent denials of interest in her superhero boss, Finn, and too-casual descriptions of his attractiveness. For example, she says:

I glance at him from the corner of my eye (something I've perfected over the years). He looks the way he always does: glossy and stunning and too sexy, like a movie star, but with something else, something darker seething underneath. Edward Cullen meets Captain Jack Sparrow – if that's conceivable – only even more psychotic and without the laughs.

It's a good thing I'm not in love with him anymore. It really is. (Radloff 2010: 37)

Katie's desire is evident in her lingering and overly perfect description of Finn, and is reinforced – like Jenna's desire in *Dark Poppy's Demise* – by the reference to *Twilight* via Edward. But while Radloff does allow Katie to express her desire, by inference if not directly, she consistently makes Katie suffer for acting on it. When Katie kisses Finn, she is immediately punished with the coincidental but tragic (and most probably violent) death of a beloved father figure, Simon. Later, when she tries to suppress her desire for Finn by cultivating a little lukewarm desire for a boy at school, the boy and his friends beat her unconscious and try to rape her.

This exposure to violence is not unique in Katie's life. As the cover art suggests with its outline of a fighting teenage girl executing a powerful side kick, the title of the novel puns on Katie's job as Finn's assistant, or sidekick, and on the violent contexts inevitably associated with the job of superhero's sidekick. As the novel opens, for example, Katie spends what she says "feels like an hour" helping Finn to "move bodies around, clean up some blood, wipe surfaces, remove the bullets from several guns and stash half a dozen AK47s" (Radloff 2010:9-10) in Finn's Porsche. The vivid detail of this description of the leavings of violence is matched in her account of her attempted rape, which includes what precisely the boys do to her and how she experiences the physical pain of the attack:

Willem is kicking at my ribs, viciously. Once. Twice. The pain is breathtaking.... Jamal comes closer, pulls Willem away from me, and for a second I'm grateful, but then he grabs my hair, starts dragging me.... Jamal is yanking at my jeans. Willem kicks me again. My shoulder goes numb, then starts hurting so much my eyes tear up. (Radloff 2010: 138)

The clarity, detail, directness and embodied physicality of this violence exposes by contrast how subdued are the hints of desire that we can infer from Katie's narration. The fact that these hints of desire are constrained to being read between the lines of her denials, and the authorial punishment she suffers for acting on her desires, suggest that a discourse of her desire cannot but be dangerous and futile, and would be better silenced.

### **A discourse of desire and violence: *In Search of Happiness***

One notable exception to the trope of silenced or evaded desire is Sonwabiso

Ngcowa's (2014) *In Search of Happiness*. An afterword to the novel explains how Ngcowa's own community has been affected by violence against lesbians, and states that Ngcowa wrote the novel specifically to challenge "injustice towards sexual minorities" (Van Dijk 2014: 149). In Chapters Three and Four I called into question the effectiveness of such intended surface ideologies, and that question still stands, but in this case, at least, I find no conflicting passive ideology to undermine Ngcowa's intent. In a way that is typical of many contemporary YA novels about lesbian heroines, but very different to most novels of heterosexual desiring girls, *In Search of Happiness* thus celebrates the sexual desire of its heroine. And, where novels such as *Dark Poppy's Demise* and *Sidekick* use love to obscure desire, Ngcowa instead uses love to validate it.

His heroine, Nana, is unambiguous about her love and her desire for her Zimbabwean neighbour, Agnes. When Agnes applies makeup to Nana's face, for example, both Nana's spirit and her entire body respond to Agnes's nearness and the feel of her breath: "She leans in close to my face. Then she stops. We look at each other. It is as if we can see into each other's souls. I can feel her warm breath. I feel a tingling all over" (Ngcowa 2014: 93). When Agnes pulls Nana to her, Nana meets her lovingly, but also physically and ardently:

I hug her, and don't let go. Then I turn my face up to hers and kiss her on the lips. A little kiss. But it brings an inexplicable feeling of joy. I look deeply into her eyes. We move closer and then kiss again. This time for longer – deeply, beautifully.

"*Ndiyakuthanda*, I love you, Nana," she whispers in my ear.

"I love you too, Agnes."

We get up and, holding hands, we walk towards her bed.  
(Ngcowa 2014: 100)

But Nana and Agnes's lives are so saturated with violent menace – memories of

the torture of Agnes's brother, Chino, in Zimbabwe, and threats in the present of both xenophobic and homophobic violence (including the threat of violence from Chino himself) – that it seems inevitable that Agnes is eventually raped, and Nana and Chino violently attacked when they find her. The novel ends optimistically, with an affirmation of Nana and Agnes's love and the happiness it can bring them even if it is hidden (Ngcowa 2014: 143), but with a strong sense that the girls will always be at risk because of their desires: going to the beach they are careful not to walk “too close” (Ngcowa 2014: 141) to one another, and Nana acknowledges the danger of the familiar world when she says, “It feels safer to embrace here in the sea, this other element” (Ngcowa 2014: 142-143).

Ngcowa's novel is remarkable for voicing a teenage girl's sexual desire with clarity, directness and physicality. In this it resembles many recent YA novels with lesbian heroines, which supports the idea that patriarchal compulsory heterosexuality is a powerful locus of opposition to a discourse of girls' desire. But *In Search of Happiness* is typical of South African YA writing in linking this desire inextricably, perhaps even subordinating it, to violence. Looking in slightly more detail at Lily Herne's *Mall Rats* series, which has attracted considerable critical attention, I want to consider some of the implications of such a link.

### **Passive sexuality for active violence: the *Mall Rats* trade-off**

The series – at the time of writing three titles: *Deadlands* (Herne 2011), *Death of a Saint* (Herne 2012) and *Army of the Lost* (Herne 2013) – is set ten years after a

zombie apocalypse. Lele is first a smuggler and then a would-be resistance fighter, and her life is centred on fighting and fight training. Her first relationship ends when the boy, Thabo, is shot. Her next partner, Ash, is a former child soldier. From the outset of the series, violence is thus to be taken for granted in Lele's situation.

Desire, on the other hand, is troubling. With Ash, initially she is troubled by guilt for being attracted to him and to Thabo simultaneously, and later she is furious to learn that he has signally betrayed her trust, manipulating her and trapping her into the life of a smuggler. In *Death of a Saint* (Herne 2012), when Ash puts his arm around her one night after they and their friends Saint and Ginger have made camp at an abandoned game lodge, where they have found a bottle of champagne to share, she is angry, tipsy, and above all ambivalent. She says:

Part of me wants to push him away from me – I want to stay angry at him – but I don't. Instead I relax, letting him hold my weight, and it feels good. I reach for the bottle again, but Ash tugs me back, and his other hand reaches for my face, turning it towards him. I find my neck tipping back, my eyes closing. His mouth settles on mine, firm and warm, and then I'm kissing him, wrapping my arms around his neck and pressing against him. I'm aware of Saint saying "Get a room, you guys!", but her voice is coming from miles away.

"Let's get out of here," Ash whispers. He takes my hand, pulls me up onto wobbly legs and leads me towards the lodge. (Herne 2012: 119)

Lele's behaviour here is passive, her role merely to allow Ash to do things – even things that she is not sure she wants. Her only active contributions – kissing him, holding him, and pressing against him – are responses to his very determined prompting: tugging her, turning her, and firmly kissing her. We might infer desire from how it "feels good" to let him hold her. But (as with Jenna) it is

difficult to disentangle this possibly sexual feeling from a social need (to repair her friendship with Ash), because the strength of the feeling is undercut by the fact that it is evidently not sufficient to induce her to focus on Ash rather than to reach for the champagne again, and – particularly – because Lele is at pains to distance herself from her own body’s potential signs of desire: it is not she who looks up, but her neck that tips back; it is not she who shuts out distraction, but her eyes that close.

Lele’s disembodied passivity – like Jenna’s confused and Katie’s silenced desires – follows the dominant socially constructed model of girls and women’s sexual behaviour criticized in Chapter Two: a model that Janet Holland et al. (1994: 23) say “has no concept of the autonomy of women’s bodies or of female sexual desire”, and that they call “passive femininity”.

Passive femininity is evident not only in the detached but acquiescent way Lele does sex, but also in how she speaks about it. The next day she wonders if Ash is regretting what she refers to as “what happened between us”, and thinks, “But you don’t do *what we did* if you’re not serious about someone, do you?” (Herne 2012: 163; my italics). She is certain that neither of them wanted to stop, and claims that: “I’ve never felt like that before – completely lost in the moment – and I know Ash felt the same. It was as if we couldn’t get enough of each other” (Herne 2012: 164). But her vague language and inability to name what she has done, even in the privacy of her own mind, support a need to excuse her sexuality through the context of being “serious about someone”. As Jenna and Katie use love to obscure desire, so Lele uses emotional commitment.

Both Sharon Thompson's (1990: 343) and Deborah L. Tolman's (2002a: 2) studies of girls' sexuality describe stories of sex that girls say "just happened", as though involuntarily. As mentioned in Chapter Two, one girl told Thompson (1990: 343), for example: "I tell you, I don't know why or how I did it. Maybe I just did it unconsciously". Part passive disembodiment, part disingenuous evasion, this calls to mind the way Lele inexplicably finds her neck and eyes moving, apparently of their own volition. Lele's detached passivity is highlighted by its pitiful contrast with Nana's straightforward ownership of her desire. Lele's face turned by Ash and her independent tipping neck are reproached by Nana's active "I turn my face up" (Ngcowa 2014: 100) to Agnes; Lele's taken hand and pulled body being led away by Ash cry out for the mutuality of Nana and Agnes's "We get up and, holding hands, we walk towards her bed" (Ngcowa 2014: 100).

As if Lele's evasive focus on commitment and her distancing language are not sufficiently convincing – as perhaps they are not – she also hides her desire behind alcohol. Such an exploitation of alcohol to cover desire, as Tolman (2002a: 140) says in her discussion of an interviewee who does the same, "muddies the question of responsibility" and "excuses her from culpability". It makes it unclear whether Saint's voice is "miles away" and Lele's legs are "wobbly" (Herne 2012: 119) because Lele is lost in pleasure, or because she needs to be drunk to negate responsibility for what she wants and does.

Lele and Ash are interrupted, and Ash withdraws from her after this night. But her behaviour is strikingly similar later, in *Army of the Lost* (Herne 2013), when she has sex with Lucien, yet another boy about whom she feels acutely

ambivalent and who (she believes) has betrayed her trust – in this case, as she sees it, manipulating her and trapping her into being sold to a wealthy and powerful older man, Mr Coom, to marry and breed for him.

Lucien visits her in Coom's compound before the planned marriage, bringing a bottle of whiskey. As before, Lele is angry, tipsy and ambivalent. When Lucien strokes her cheek she pushes him away and says, "Don't touch me" (Herne 2013: 126), an apparently unequivocal rejection. In a moment, however, she notes, more ambiguously, that it "feels weird being so close to him" (Herne 2013: 126). Her ambivalence, and her insistence on distancing herself from her own desire rather than acknowledging it, become clear when she says: "He's sitting far too close to me. I don't move away; decide not to question why I don't" (Herne 2013: 127). And, as a result, her earlier "Don't touch me" becomes retrospectively less unequivocal: it certainly reflects unfeigned anger, but it is perhaps also a careful forestalling of desire. Her ambivalence remains in evidence when she says:

He takes off his jacket, throws it onto the floor.  
"Making yourself at home?"  
"Oui." He smiles at me, holding my gaze and something sparks  
between us. "You have a problem with this?" (Herne 2013: 128)

She is evidently unable to tell Lucien directly that he should not make himself "at home", but her sarcasm when he does so is a rebuff; she acknowledges the spark between them, but appears to be unable to name it as desire, or even attraction. Neither repulsing nor inviting him, neither denying nor admitting her desire, she avoids answering his question.

This is surely partly because of the passive femininity of her sexual behaviour,

and partly because of the genuine ambivalence of her desire. As the possibly sexual response that it “feels good” (Herne 2012: 119) to let Ash hold her is undercut by the fact that the good feeling is not sufficient to induce her to focus on Ash rather than to reach for more champagne, so the strength of the spark between her and Lucien is undercut by the fact that the sight of the tattoos on his arms is sufficient to distract her into thoughts of her changing attitudes to Jova, the person who created a further tattoo on Lucien’s back. Lucien may spark desire in Lele but – ambivalent as she is both about her own desires and about Lucien himself – the spark is clearly nowhere near all-consuming.

Nevertheless, her passive femininity requires Lele to distance herself from even this mild spark of desire. She not only reminds Lucien that she is drunk, but also blames him for her intoxication (Herne 2013: 128), although in reality she herself snatched the whiskey from his hand (Herne 2013: 126) and then swallowed it by “glug” (Herne 2013: 126, 127), “swig” (Herne 2013: 127) and “knock[ed] back” mouthful (Herne 2013: 128) “on an empty stomach” (Herne 2013: 127). When Lucien slides his fingertips up her arm she yet again reminds the reader that her sexual response, weak as it is, should be linked to alcohol and thus excused by its absolution: “I let him. A tingling sensation dances down into my belly, melding with the swirling alcohol” (Herne 2013: 128).

Perhaps because this bodily response, despite its slightness, appears to be stronger than what Lele has experienced with Ash, she is still more passive with Lucien than with Ash. As with Ash, her acquiescence is a matter of allowing things to be done to her and not moving away, but, unlike with Ash, she does not

respond to Lucien's physical prompts. The chapter ends – conveniently pre-empting any account of what must, at some point, become her responsive and responsible participation in sex – when she is at her most passive: “His face is close to mine. Too close.... And then he pushes me down onto the bed” (Herne 2013: 128).

Afterwards, Lele's thoughts and language recall the passive femininity of her thoughts after sex with Ash. She is once again unable to name her own sexual activity, even in her own mind, and instead she thinks vaguely about “that night” and “what happened between us” (Herne 2013: 177). As she did with Ash, she wonders “Does he regret what happened between us?” (Herne 2013: 177). And – without any way of hiding her desire behind a claim to emotional commitment, as she did with Ash – she thinks: “I don't even know if *I* regret it” (Herne 2013: 177). Although this observation acknowledges the possibility that she might not regret it, it suggests, at best, a high degree of confusion or equivocation about her own sexual behaviour.

Sexually, therefore, Lele consistently performs an extremely passive femininity in which she allows herself little concept of bodily autonomy or of her own sexual desire. In violent contexts, however, she is a different person, capable and responsible; her performance of femininity is anything but passive; and far from allowing things to happen, as she does with Ash, she is proactive about protecting the autonomy of her body, whether from villains, zombies, or state forces. For example, when she and Saint are trapped by Previn and Scott, two men who wish to rape and enslave them, Lele takes control and initiative –

despite being considerably more drunk than when Ash kisses or Lucien visits her. Caught in a stranglehold by Previn, who outweighs her by fifty kilograms and has a knife to her neck, she knows, “I have to stop this. I can’t let this happen” (Herne 2012: 220). So drunk she has just vomited, she nevertheless quickly devises and executes a successful feint that enables her to kick and immobilize Previn. Still in control and proactively planning, she then turns her attention to Scott, who tries to kick her, but she says:

I brace myself, grab his foot, twist it and yank him towards me. He loses his balance, stumbles backwards, and, as I release my grip, he falls back, hitting his head with a clunk on the table behind him. I scramble to my feet, ready to drop-kick him if necessary, but he doesn’t get back up. (Herne 2012: 221)

Even Lele’s language is different when describing violence: far more specific and direct than when she describes sex. We are never entirely certain what Lele and Ash do sexually; we know that it does not involve penile-vaginal penetration, but that when they are interrupted Lele is no longer wearing her jeans. Lele is so vague about what she does with Ash that Inggs (2016: 131) describes sex with Lucien as the “only overtly sexual encounter” Lele experiences. The curtain is, however, closed on Lele and Lucien after Lucien pushes her onto the bed; we know specifically that they have had intercourse only because Lele is subsequently punished with a pregnancy<sup>26</sup>. When Lele fights, by contrast, we know precisely what she and her antagonists do and how they do it. And where after sex, both with Ash and with Lucien, she is concerned with questions of

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<sup>26</sup> Unlike Bella, in *Twilight*, Lele is genuinely horrified and frightened by her pregnancy. At first she denies the possibility, telling herself: “It can’t happen to me. I can’t have a baby!” (Herne 2013: 240). Once she has forced herself to accept the fact that she is pregnant, she tells Ash, and says: “The world is screwed up beyond belief, Ash. The last thing I want to do is bring a child into the middle of all this crap. I feel ... I dunno, scared” (Herne 2013: 306).

regret and is unable to name what she has done, after a fight in *Army of the Lost* (Herne 2013) she thinks, “The rush I felt when I floored those guys hasn’t entirely gone”, and says, “I can’t deny that I enjoyed every second of beating the crap out of them” (Herne 2013: 125). Far from her uncertainty about whether she regrets having had sex with Lucien, after the fight she thinks simply: “I shut my eyes, replay the scene over and over. Would I have done anything differently? No” (Herne 2013: 125).

Molly Brown (2014: 34) argues convincingly that “Lele is portrayed as an innocent fighting for survival in a hostile urban environment in which violence is an everyday occurrence”, and that to maintain her innocence Herne either has to kill her or to valorize aggression in her “while condemning it in those ranged against” her. Thus, as Brown says: “Lele’s fighting skills may grant her ... personal agency” but they also ensure “that the books position violence as the only appropriate response to threats.” In addition, since one of the ways in which Lele, as a narrator, portrays herself as innocent is by distancing herself from her sexual desires and behaviour, the personal agency that she wins through her violence has to be sacrificed in her sexuality. Jessica Murray (2013: 9) rightly criticizes the series for vacillating “between challenging and perpetuating” stereotypes of gender and sexuality. One reason it does this might be Herne’s apparent need to balance Lele’s active violent femininity with a passive sexual one.

For Joan-Mari Barendse (2015: 89), the “gratuitous violence” of the series is inherent in the “zombie genre”. This is true, but reducing the violence of the

novels to a function of genre misses how the series fits into a pattern in South African YA fiction of situating desire in inherently – and excessively – violent genres (from psycho thriller to zombie war and superhero action) and social contexts (such as xenophobia and hate rape of lesbians).

### **Violence, desire and denial**

I do not believe that there is anything to be gained from denying the very real role of violence in South African childhood and youth, and it is not my intention to do so. Both actual violence, and the fear of violence, permeate and shape South African teenagers' lives, as they do the fictional lives of Jenna, Katie, Nana and Lele. According to Rachel Bray et al. (2010: 120), "findings of the 2005 National Youth Victimization Survey ... point out the large proportion of this cohort who have witnessed, or been victims of, personal assault". In *Masiphumelele*, where Nana and Agnes's romance is set, Bray et al. (2010: 120) found, for example, that most of the adolescents they studied "have witnessed violence of various kinds", and that these adolescents assert that young adults and teenagers themselves are the "primary perpetrators". And Nana and Agnes are typical of black lesbian and bisexual women and girls in the Western Cape; a study by the nonprofit organisation the Triangle Project and the UNISA Centre for Applied Psychology (Rich 2006: 15, 29, 30) found that 86 per cent of these women and girls live in fear of sexual, and 76 per cent of physical, abuse because of their sexual orientation.

But violence is not the only, or necessarily the most important, shaping force in all South African teenagers' lives, and there is nothing to be gained – and, I have tried to argue in previous chapters, much to be lost – from denying the sexual desires of girls in their teens. In 2015 the Criminal Law (Sexual Offences and Related Matters) Amendment Act was amended to decriminalize sex between teenagers from 12 to 16 years old (Republic of South Africa 2015). As Christina Nomdo (2015: n.p.) reports, the amendment “passed with no objections from any political party.” If there is tacit agreement, across the political and ideological spectrum and at the highest levels of representation of the country, that even the youngest teenagers might choose to engage in sexual activity, then I would hope that at least some of these sexually active teenagers might also experience sexual desire – that they are not all, like Jenna, struggling to distinguish sexual from social and psychological desires or, like Lele, passively allowing sex about which they are at best ambivalent. And I would certainly hope that they do not all learn to associate sex indissolubly with violence, as Jenna, Katie, Nana and Lele all must do.

*Twilight* (Meyer 2005; 2006; 2007; 2008) wallows in its heroine's desire, and uses a lot of danger and a little violence for conflict and tension. Books such as *Dark Poppy's Demise* (Partridge 2011) and the *Mall Rats* (Herne 2011; 2012; 2013) novels reverse this formula, wallowing in quantities of danger and violence and using a little confused desire for conflict and tension, to the cost of both their heroines and their girl readers. *Sidekick* (Radloff 2010) tries to balance desire and violence, but cannot do so because of the stifled nature of its heroine's desire, and the excessively violent authorial punishments she experiences for it.

Only *In Search of Happiness* (Ngcowa 2014) both admits and criticizes the link between desire and violence that it portrays; that is, indeed, part of its explicit purpose. Only Ngcowa seems to acknowledge that desire is a more age-appropriate experience for a teenage girl than violence, and that a necessary acknowledgement and representation of a violent reality does not have to be accompanied by a gratuitous abandonment to it. The contrast of his story of lesbian desire highlights how South African authors writing for teenagers in English, even more than foreign authors, seem determined either to deny heterosexual girls' normal desires, or to terrorize them away.

## **THE WRONG OBJECTS OF DESIRE**

## ***Girl Re-Membered***

*My class prefect is one of the delights of my life: the cleverest girl in the school and one of the sweetest natured, with a sprinkle of light freckles across her cheekbones, rich brown eyes, a heavy ponytail that's always on the verge of slipping free from its elastic, and the perfectly crooked teeth and smile of Alyssa Milano in Who's the Boss? (Cohan et al. 1984). She has beautiful posture; in my forties I will be able to picture the lines of her body, and the way she carries herself, more clearly than the face of someone that I dated for a year in my twenties.*

*In an uncomplicated way, I like being near her. On those mornings when it's her duty to inspect the length of our dresses, it's a thrill to backchat her cheekily when she shakes her head on seeing mine, and afterwards I walk into class glowing. When she checks our nails she takes my fingertips into her warm dry hand, looks me in the eye, and scolds me gently because my nails are always too long. I am ten. The thought of sex embarrasses and revolts me, but nail inspections are a simple pleasure from which I might burst.*

\* \* \*

*I'm older now, perhaps fifteen or so. My friends and I, as I've already said, love hypotheticals about who we'd like to do what with. "If you had to kiss a girl, who would it be?" I ask. Why would they ever have to kiss a girl, they ask. This seems oddly evasive to me. (Retrospectively, I see that it wasn't evasion, just incomprehension. I see that while I was still choosing the best among the treats, my*

*friends had unexpectedly been tumbled into a different game, and asked to choose the best of the worst. I do see that now.)*

*“Okay.... If someone held a gun to your head and said you had to kiss a girl, who would it be?” I ask. One friend has zoned out of the conversation. Another grudgingly answers, but the third won’t compromise her values, even hypothetically.*

*“If Jesus said he would save everybody in the world if you kissed a girl, who would it be?” I ask. My friend will confine all the unsaved to Hell rather than commit this sin. The conversation moves on but I don’t, heart racing from my own imaginings, a straight girl wishing desperately that Jesus would hold a gun to my head and tell me that he wants me to make out with my friend Kate.*

\* \* \*

*I know that I am a straight girl because I’m very excited about boys, often very aroused by their bodies and their voices and the smell of them and their attentions to me. My schoolgirl crushes don’t call my straightness into question, because lesbians don’t feel excited and aroused by boys, and bisexuals aren’t real. The ones I know from fiction are gorgeous and fantastical, beasts of myth that could never exist in the same reality as I do: Frank-N-Furter in The Rocky Horror Picture Show (1975), or Villanelle, the web-footed boatman’s daughter in Jeanette Winterson’s (1987) The Passion, who can walk on water, and reclaims the heart she lost to her lover from storage in an indigo jar. And schoolgirl crushes aren’t, in any case,*

*sexual. Girls like Alison, in the St Clare's (Blyton 1943, 1944a, 1944b) books that I read as a child, have crushes all the time, and I'm not so naïve as to think that Enid Blyton would be writing about sex at a girls' boarding school. (Retrospectively, I see that Alison's crushes were always intended either to represent something different from mine, or to convince me that mine were as asexual as hers. I see, for example, that Alison probably never wished for Miss Theobald to instruct her, in that devastating quiet compelling way of hers, to make out with Sadie (see Blyton 1943) or Miss Quentin (see Blyton 1944a) or Angela (Blyton 1944b). I do see that now.) Outside of fiction, I've read that Mick Jagger is supposed to have slept with David Bowie at least once, but Jagger is larger than life by far, and there's no celebrity more carefully constructed than Bowie; clearly they're no more part of the same reality as mine than are Frank or Villanelle.*

*I've never encountered anyone who refers to themselves using the word 'bisexual', either in fiction or in real life.*

*It seems clear to me that same-sex crushes and desires are perhaps not typical but nevertheless quite common among straight girls and women. I imagine that heterosexuality represents a sort of social contract, probably religious in origin, to prioritize and act on only certain feelings and desires. I feel a little smug about my open-minded ability to admit to myself the desires that I assume we all feel, but agree silently to ignore.*

\* \* \*

*Does all of this sound like straightforward denial? But 'bisexual' is not a label I would fear; indeed, it's one I would welcome, if it occurred to me for one moment that I could take it seriously. I'm arrogant enough to be almost certain in my own mind that there's no sin in same-sex love or sex. I've worked out that the sin in gay sex is that of sex outside marriage; one day when the church realizes this and allows men to marry men and women to marry women, there will be no sin in the consummation of these unions. I'm moderately sure I need Jesus to order me to get it on with Kate because she and I aren't married, not because God would mind our two girls' bodies meeting. And although I know that my world is violently homophobic, I am – absolutely – naïve enough to imagine that living under threat might lend an appealingly poignant bittersweetness to romance, an exquisite heady fever to passion. I consciously envy lesbian girls because they get to go to lesbian clubs and meet lesbian girls, and kiss them and have sex with them and be their girlfriends, but it would seem disrespectful for a straight girl like me to perform lesbianism just for kicks. I'm well aware of my opposite sex desires too (if I weren't, both Frank-N-Furter and my lovely boyfriend would be there to remind me), and it would seem downright foolish for a straight girl like me to swear off boys. Unequivocally, positively, indubitably, I would welcome a label that would make me a legitimate (if chaste) lover of both girls and boys.*

*The world I live in is simply structured in such a way that I see no plausible evidence that bisexuality exists, and a plenitude of evidence that it doesn't.*

\* \* \*

*Is it reasonable of me to say that I was bi at that time? My cultural straightness was nowhere more evident than in the casual brutality with which I delegitimized my own desires. I couldn't have kissed a willing gay girl who turned me on, because I wouldn't have seen my own desire as a valid reason for giving such a girl the impression that I desired her; I would have felt myself to be mocking her desire (legitimate, unlike my own). I couldn't see my own acknowledged desires as plausible evidence that a category for desires such as mine might exist. I identified as straight, and political correctness, which I think is a necessary and helpful directive, calls on us to honour the individual's own identification. But in this case I'm not convinced. It makes sense to me to honour the identification of a trans girl who wants to use the women's toilets, because that is to honour what someone knows about herself above the assumptions of ignorant people. I was the ignorant one when I identified as straight, although I did know myself. What I didn't know was straightness: I do think that if I had fully grasped that it's a relatively fundamental characteristic of the straightness of straight girls and women that they generally have little or no sexual desire for other girls or women, I would have realized I didn't belong in their group.*

*I have said that to desire was my first, and foundational, sexual act. To leave desire out of my sexual identity, past or present, is to leave out the foundation of my sexual existence. If I honour my past identification above my past desires then I cannot honour what I knew about myself above the assumptions of my own ignorance. I thought I was straight. I was wrong.*

\* \* \*

*Kenji Yoshino (2000: 356, 358) writes about teaching a course in “Sexual Orientation and the Law”. In the introductory unit, he taught his students that classifications of sexual orientation using only the categories ‘heterosexual’ and ‘homosexual’ are “unstable and naïve”. But as soon as this introduction was over, he says, he found that in “the face of legal discussions and academic commentary that were relentless in reifying the straight/gay binary, it was difficult to hold the bisexual steadily visible, even as a spectral possibility” (Yoshino 2000: 358).*

*This is what bisexual invisibility looks like.*

*It would have been better for me, I think, if as a teenager I had met even one openly bi person, read even one book like Sara Ryan’s (2001) Empress of the World. But bisexual invisibility is, as Yoshino suggests, not only a blank space or gap. It’s also an erasure. It’s also something – a legal discussion, an academic commentary, even the fabulousness of Frank or the magic of Villanelle, although of course there are fabulous, magical bisexuals in real life too – that fills in the gap, obscures the space that might otherwise draw attention to the absence – and thus to the presence – of the bisexual who should be standing there.*

*I have found this to be more than a little confusing from the perspective of that bisexual.*

\* \* \*

*I thought I was straight. I was wrong. This is what bisexual invisibility does.*

## Chapter Six

### A Stereotyped Essence: Bisexuality in YA Fiction

*[bisexual is a weird word. it sounds like you have to buy sex. or it could be one of those one-celled creatures that you study in biology. “today, class, we will study the life cycle of the bisexual.” “oh, I thought those were extinct.”]* (Ryan 2001: n.p.; original italics)

Nic, the protagonist of Sara Ryan’s (2001) *Empress of the World*, writes field notes on her life, including a note on the word ‘bisexual’. The awkwardness of this word, which she is beginning to associate with herself, mirrors the awkwardness of this concept in young adult (YA) literature, where bisexuals are rare even in books with queer characters. It also reflects my own theoretical awkwardness in relation to both word and concept: ‘bisexual’ is indeed a weird word. David Halperin’s (2009) ‘Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Bisexual’ draws attention, for example, to the indeterminacy of its meaning. And even if its meaning were fixed, using it to delimit a category of sexual preference, and even arguing for the increased visibility of that category (as I do in this chapter) is awkward if one is suspicious of sexual identity as both a social construct and an essentializing discourse,<sup>27</sup> which, despite identifying as bisexual, I am. Like Leo

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<sup>27</sup> Social scientists have often described sexuality either as a biologically essential orientation, or as a socially constructed preference. The idea of essence has failed, however, to restrict itself purely to bioscience. Instead, what is common is what Leo Bersani (1995: 2-3) describes as “the elaborating of certain erotic preferences into a ‘character’ – into a kind of erotically determined essence”, despite the fact that, as Bersani says, such elaboration “can never be a disinterested scientific enterprise”. My criticism of essentializing discourses thus addresses not the idea that sexual preference is inherent, but the social construction, or ‘elaboration’, of essential character from sexual preference.

Bersani (1995: 4), however, I think that if queer theory's "suspicions of identity are necessary, they are not necessarily liberating". Bersani (1995: 4,5; original italics) argues that "gay men and lesbians have nearly disappeared into their sophisticated awareness of how they have been *constructed as* gay men and lesbians", and shows that "gay critiques of homosexual identity have generally been *desexualizing* discourses", suggesting that critiques of imposed gay identities, in either desexualizing or deconstructing gayness, risk erasing not only constructed identities but gay people with them. He points, out, however, that "deconstructing an imposed identity will not erase the habit of desire" (Bersani 1995: 6). If, then, the essentialized construct of bisexual identity is dismantled, the 'habit of desire' for more than one gender remains. I use the awkward word 'bisexual' to refer to those of us who share this habit because it is, as the San Francisco Human Rights Commission (San Francisco Human Rights Commission 2010: iii) (SFHRC) says, "the term that is most widely understood as describing those whose attractions fall outside an either/or paradigm". It is also, I think, the term most likely to be understood by teenagers who experience gender-plural desires, and read YA books about bisexual protagonists.

While I wish to make the bisexual habit of desire – and particularly the habit of the bisexual girl's desire – visible, I do not wish to essentialize sexual preference by suggesting that the category or concept 'bisexual' implies any common identity or characteristics beyond this shared habit of desire. In fact, I wish specifically to critique the imposition of bisexual identities on bisexual characters in YA novels. Such imposed identities are invariably essentialist in nature, implicitly defining bisexuality as an essence that shapes and defines

identity and is evidenced in certain essential characteristics, rather than as the habit of sexual desire for more than one gender. If it is in desexualizing bisexuality that critiques of imposed bisexual identities risk erasing not only constructed identities but bisexuals with them, then sexual desire for more than one gender – not an identity, but merely a preference or habit – should be what is definitive of bisexuals in critiques that seek to represent, rather than to erase, us as bisexuals. Similarly, in novels that seek to represent, rather than to erase, bisexuals it must be plural desires, rather than imposed sexual identities, that represent the bisexuality of bisexual characters. Such novels should show characters to be bisexual by showing them to experience (or to have experienced) sexual desire for other characters of differing genders. Deborah L. Tolman (2002a: 50) defines embodiment as “the experiential sense of living in and through our bodies [that] is premised on the ability to feel our bodily sensations, one of which is sexual desire”. Novels that represent, rather than erase, bisexuals depend on a recognition of the embodied plural sexual desires of bisexual characters.

A novel that evades such embodied, plural, sexual desires has few alternative means by which to show readers that a character is bisexual. If it evades the sexual nature of bisexual desires, it can signify a character as bisexual by conflating sexual desire with social desires, such as the desires for a girlfriend or boyfriend, or by conflating sexual desire and love, including platonic love, for people of more than one gender. If it evades the plural nature of bisexual desires, it can label a character as bisexual without showing the character desiring, or ever having desired, people of more than one gender. And if it redefines

bisexuality in terms of a supposed essence, it can show that a character is bisexual through stereotyped behaviour and characteristics that are widely believed to be essential to bisexuality. The desexualizing and monosexualizing discourses in which essentialist bisexual identities are simultaneously rooted and propagated can thus be underpinned in fiction through narrative evasion of either the sexuality or the plurality of bisexual desires, and through the essentialist stereotypes that emerge to resignify and redefine bisexuality, and bisexuals, after these evasions.

A critique of such evasions and impositions is necessary if, as Karen Coats (2011: 315) maintains, YA literature “exerts a powerful influence over its readers at a particularly malleable time in their identity formation”. Thomas Crisp (2008: 239) suggests that this influence is particularly strong in novels about lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender (LGBT) characters, when he writes that Alex Sanchez’s (2001; 2003; 2005) popular Rainbow Boys trilogy may be the only representation of LGBT, queer or questioning people that many readers have seen, and that, as a result, “these books carry with them a tremendous amount of power”. The focus of representation in the Rainbow Boys series is on gay boys. Books with bisexual protagonists are even more likely than books about gay boys or lesbian girls to be the only representations of bisexuals that readers encounter, because of a lack of bisexual visibility so disproportionate that it is routinely referred to as bisexual invisibility.

## Bisexuals visible and invisible

Kenji Yoshino (2000) suggests that one way to demonstrate this invisibility is to compare the incidence and the visibility of bisexuality and of homosexuality. Yoshino's (2000: 380; original italics) analysis of five major sex studies<sup>28</sup> concludes that the incidence of bisexuality has consistently been shown to be "*greater than or comparable to*" that of homosexuality (2000: 380). An SFHRC (2010: 1-3) review of three more-recent studies<sup>29</sup> finds bisexuals to be "the largest single population within the LGBT community in the United States". Moreover, the number of bisexuals in a 2009 survey of LGBT school-goers in the US (Kosciw et al. 2010: 10) was just over half the *combined* total of gay and lesbian participants. Yet, despite this evidence, when I searched for the words 'bisexuality' and 'homosexuality' online in January 2019, like Yoshino (2000: 368) ten years earlier, I found their proportional incidences to be markedly different from what the studies would lead one to expect. Google Scholar, for example, had 49 800 results for 'bisexuality' and 531 000 for 'homosexuality', while Google itself had 3 220 000 and 96 500 000 respectively. Clearly, bisexual visibility in scholarly and popular discourse does not reflect bisexual incidence in the general population.

This mismatch is also evident in discourses specifically focussed on sexuality.

One example comes from a report entitled 'Levels of Empowerment among

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<sup>28</sup> Yoshino examines the studies of Alfred Kinsey (1948; 1953), William H. Masters and Virginia E. Johnson (1979), Samuel S. Janus and Cynthia L. Janus (1993), Kaye Wellings et al. (1994), and Edward O. Laumann et al. (1994).

<sup>29</sup> The SFHRC reviews the studies of William D. Mosher (2005), Patrick J. Egan (2007) and D. Herbenick (2010).

Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) People in Gauteng, South Africa' (Wells & Polders 2004), produced by the University of South Africa and an LGBT non-profit organisation, in which the word 'bisexual' appears only four times ('gay' appears eleven times, and 'lesbian' fourteen). One might dismiss this example, and what it unintentionally reveals about the empowerment of Gauteng bisexuals (such as me), as atypical from a global perspective: Bernedette Muthien (2005: 56) notes that South Africa "still has a long way to go in terms of inserting the B and T into the G&L discourse" and, as Cheryl Stobie (2004: 36) notes, bisexuality has "received scant attention" in sexuality discourse and activism in Africa. However, though bisexuality might be expected to be less visible in Gauteng, it might equally be expected to be more visible in San Francisco, which is known, as Arlene Stein (2006: 49) says, "for its tolerance of sexual nonconformity" and as a "clearinghouse for sexual information". Yet the SFHRC (2010: 11) points out, in an example very similar to the Gauteng research, that the word 'bisexual' appears only once in the 2008 HIV/AIDS Epidemiology Annual Report of the San Francisco Department of Public Health. Even more strikingly, in Oxford's well-known Very Short Introduction series, the index to the volume on *Sexuality* (Mottier, 2008: 148) contains neither 'bisexual' nor 'bisexuality' (although, for comparison, it does list two references to 'PoMosexuals'<sup>30</sup>).

YA fiction and scholarship maintain this trend. Minority representations and absences have received significant attention in YA scholarship, but despite a

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<sup>30</sup> 'PoMosexual' is a term coined from 'postmodernism' and 'sexual' to label sexuality explicitly as unlabelled.

growing body of queer YA studies, little has been written on bisexuality in YA literature.<sup>31</sup> Similarly, YA books themselves have paid scant attention to bisexuals. Michelle Anne Abate and Kenneth Kidd (2011: 5) describe homosexuality as “nearly a mainstream topic in YA literature”; in 2003 alone, twenty-one LGBT titles were published in English (Cart & Jenkins 2006: 191). However, my searches of scholarly articles, bibliographies, popular LGBT media websites, LGBT children’s book websites, and Amazon, yielded only thirteen English-language YA titles, and one series, published before 2012 whose protagonists arguably show sexual desire for more than one gender.<sup>32</sup> The number of YA books with bisexual protagonists has since begun to increase, but is still nowhere near significant.

The scarcity of bisexuality in YA fiction thus follows (and furthers) a broader invisibility that is likely to shape most teenagers’ lived experience of bisexuality. Teenagers are in the process of constructing themselves as sexual beings, and those who experience gender-plural desires frequently struggle with what Ronald C. Fox (1996: 29) describes as “uncertainty about how to interpret concurrent sexual attractions to both women and men” (or boys and girls). As a result, bisexual invisibility is particularly problematic for such teenagers, since it

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<sup>31</sup> Lydia Kokkola’s (2013: 97) study of desire in adolescent fiction, for example, states merely that “bisexuality is treated so similarly to same-sex desire that [Kokkola has] not treated it as a separate category”.

<sup>32</sup> In addition to the books discussed in this chapter, these are: M.E. Kerr’s (1997) *Hello, I Lied*; Aidan Chambers’s (1999) *Postcards from No Man’s Land*; Lena Prodan’s (2008) *The Suicide Year*; Malinda Lo’s (2009) *Ash*; A.J. Walkley’s (2009) *Queer Greer*; Rachel Cohn’s (2010) *Very Le Freak*; Katherine Scott Nelson’s (2011) *Have You Seen Me*; Alex Sanchez’s (2011) *Boyfriends with Girlfriends*; Mary Rawson’s (2011) *All of Us*; and Sara Shepard’s (2006) *Pretty Little Liars*, along with the rest of the *Pretty Little Liars* series.

reduces the conceivability and plausibility of bisexuality as an explanation for their plural desires. Moreover, although bisexual communities are both socially and psychologically crucial for bisexuals (see Fox 1996: 29; Ochs 1996: 235; McLean 2008: 63-64), invisibility severely limits the likelihood of bisexual teenagers' knowingly encountering other bisexuals, let alone bisexual communities.

Scholars such as Robyn McCallum (1999), Roberta Seelinger Trites (2000) and Alison Waller (2009) have argued that YA books educate, socialize and acculturate. McCallum (1999: 256) argues correctly that "concepts of personal identity and selfhood are formed in dialogue with others, with language and with society", so that YA books form part of this educating, socializing and acculturating process. YA authors writing about bisexual protagonists cannot but know that they are breaking new ground, and they are unlikely to be unaware that they are countering invisibility. Their books must be more or less conscious exercises in visibility. I think – without wishing to overstate the influence of fiction and neglect the roles of readers themselves, or of their societies, in the dialogues through which teenage readers fashion concepts of self – that as such these books have the potential to help bisexual teenagers to interpret their plural sexual desires, and to fill the bisexual lacunas in their worlds with bisexual communities, even if only fictional ones.<sup>33</sup>

It might appear, then, that the mere existence of YA novels about bisexual

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<sup>33</sup> Vanessa Wayne Lee (1998: 158) suggests, similarly, that "lesbian texts" offer lesbian teenagers an important "point of lesbian identification and community."

characters solves the problem of bisexual invisibility for teenage readers. As the tension between definitions of bisexuality in terms of plural desire and in terms of stereotypes of essence suggests, however, this simple solution is complicated from the outset by the question of what a bisexual character is, and what conceptions of bisexuality such novels make visible. My reading of representations of bisexuality in selected YA novels with bisexual protagonists thus critiques the uses these texts make of the potential they hold for bisexual teenage readers: the aid they offer in the interpretation of plural sexual desires, and the nature of the visibilities with which they fill the bisexual lacuna.

Assuming that higher-profile books have the potential to reach a wider audience, and are easier for teenagers to access, I chose four YA novels because of their relative prominence. Julie Anne Peters's (2012) *It's Our Prom (So Deal With It)* was selected for the 2013 American Library Association (ALA) Rainbow List, and presumably benefits from Peters's established fan base. Brent Hartinger's (2007) *Double Feature: Attack of the Soul-Sucking Brain Zombies/Bride of the Soul-Sucking Brain Zombies*<sup>34</sup>, the third book in the Russell Middlebrook series, won the 2007 Bisexual Lambda Literary Award, and its profile is further raised by Hartinger's strong online presence and by a film, *Geography Club* (2013), based on the first book in the series. Lili Wilkinson's (2009) *Pink* is a 2012 Stonewall Honor Book and was nominated for a Children's/YA Lambda in 2012, while Sara Ryan's (2001) *Empress of the World* was chosen for the 2002 ALA Best Books for Young Adults list and nominated for a Children's/YA Lambda in 2002.

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<sup>34</sup> For the rest of this chapter I will refer to Peters's (2012) novel as *It's Our Prom*, and to Hartinger's (2007) book as *Double Feature*.

My analysis of the representation of bisexuality in these four texts explores how they implicitly define bisexuality, and considers whether they impose essentialized identities on their bisexual characters. It begins with *It's Our Prom* (Peters 2012) and *Double Feature* (Hartinger 2007), which I have grouped as examples of an ideological middle ground between the most and least empowering representations of teenage bisexual protagonists. *It's Our Prom* (Peters 2012) is exceptional within this thesis because its bisexual protagonist is a boy. I have chosen to discuss it, nevertheless, because of the striking similarity of its treatment of bisexuality to that of *Double Feature* (Hartinger 2007). Together, they give a sense of the consistency with which bisexuality is portrayed across different books, and even different genders, in this middle ground. At the same time, they also afford an opportunity for contrast, bringing into view an important distinction – even within the context of the problematized field of plural desire – between typical representations of boy and girl protagonists' experiences of such desire. After these two novels I consider *Pink* (Wilkinson 2009), as an example of what may be found at the more disempowering margin of this middle ground, and then *Empress of the World* (Ryan 2001), which represents the margin that is more empowering.

**The middle ground: somewhat stereotyped, and neither very bi nor particularly sexual**

*It's Our Prom* (Peters 2012) is structured around the attempts of three friends, Luke, Azure and Radhika, to plan an inclusive prom. Its focalization alternates

between the viewpoints of Luke, who is bisexual, and Azure, who is lesbian. Both want to take their straight friend, Radhika, to the prom, which strains their friendships with each other and with Radhika; in the end, however, the three are reconciled. Also, Azure reunites with an ex-girlfriend, and Luke begins a relationship with a boy called Ryan, who is involved in a school play that Luke produces.

Luke's attraction to Radhika can straightforwardly be characterized as desire – a significant point to which I will return when comparing the representation of his bisexuality with that of Min, in *Double Feature* (Hartinger 2007). His desire is embodied in, among other things, “Sweaty palms. Pounding pulse. Goose bumps whenever she's around. Fluttery stomach. Hard-on...” (Peters 2012: 212). However, although these embodiments are sexual, they are hardly overwhelming; a boy called Connor, by contrast, leaves Luke's heart “crashing like a bass drum” (Peters 2012: 57), with an intensity that overwhelms the airy, lightweight connotations of, for instance, a “fluttery stomach”. Similarly, Luke wants to hold Radhika's hand (Peters 2012: 163), but, less chastely, to “rest [his] hand on [Connor's] leg. Pat it sympathetically. Feel his muscles” (Peters 2012: 226). And the wet dreams that he has about a young male teacher (Peters 2012: 36) are also more powerfully sexual than his embodied responses to Radhika.

The courtly love tradition may be a useful lens through which to view Luke's more lukewarm attraction to Radhika. He explicitly differentiates his feelings for Connor and Radhika in terms of lust and true love (Peters 2012: 189), and it is a conventional, sexually pure and passive femininity that appeals to him when he

describes Radhika laughing “softly in that sweet, sexy way of hers” (Peters 2012: 32): a way that is, implicitly, sexy *because* it is soft and sweet – innocent, gentle, not forward. He idealizes Radhika in matters both large and deflatingly petty. For example, he elevates her to a (presumably asexual) “guardian angel”, believing that, because of her, both he and their lesbian friend Azure have been “treated with more respect in school” (Peters 2012: 16); he also refuses to believe that she can be tone deaf because he says that she is “perfect in every way” (Peters 2012: 35).

When Luke responds less sexually to Radhika than to Connor, it may be either because his desire for her is less sexual, or because of learned constructions of gender relations. His list of embodied responses (Peters 2012: 212) is offered as proof that he loves Radhika, suggesting that he sees sexual desire for a girl as needing legitimization through love. However, as soon as he begins his relationship with Ryan, he thinks of Radhika: “She’s still gorgeous and desirable. But maybe a little less so? I hope we’ll always be friends” (Peters 2012: 332). With this, he confirms that her attraction has, for him, always been based more firmly on social interests and companionship than on his mild sexual desire for her.

By repeatedly minimizing the sexuality of his other-gender desire, dissolving it into either heterosociality or a somewhat frigid courtly admiration, the narrative continually problematizes and undermines the plurality of Luke’s sexual desires. This is emphasized when Radhika questions, and Azure explicitly denies, his bisexuality (Peters 2012: 143, 209). Azure believes that Luke is gay but refuses

to admit it because he gets more attention as bisexual (Peters 2012: 205), reinforcing three common stereotypes about bisexuals: that we do not exist; that we are really closeted homosexuals; and that we are essentially attention-seeking (see Hutchins 1996: 241; Israel & Mohr 2004: 121; Ochs 2011: 172; Esterline & Galupo 2013: 107-109). The first two beliefs self-evidently erase bisexuality. The third appears to increase its visibility, but may effectively also erase it by discouraging its expression<sup>35</sup>, as Yoshino (2000: 396) argues. It also supports beliefs, such as Azure's, that what is definitive about bisexuals is the pursuit of attention, rather than the experience of gender-plural desire.

Disappointingly, the narrative itself supports Azure's belief: Luke is exceptionally attention-seeking. He organizes and enters a prom drag contest, and writes, directs and stars in a school musical about his own coming out. His relationship with Ryan begins when Ryan adds an unscripted kiss (which earns a standing ovation) to the end of the musical (Peters 2012: 317). Ryan then runs off, but Luke chases him and informs readers, "I'm not aware of the curtain opening again or the spotlight finding me. I just hold Ryan and kiss him until the roaring of the crowd is a *symphonie fantastique*" (Peters 2012: 318). Luke's affected

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<sup>35</sup> This argument is made plausible by perceptions of bisexuals so negative that Gregory M. Herek's (2002: 268) survey of heterosexual attitudes found bisexuals to be viewed more coldly across the US than Puerto Ricans, Haitians, people who are pro-life, people who are pro-choice, people with AIDS, and gays and lesbians; only intravenous drug users were viewed less warmly than bisexuals. This coldness is exclusive neither to the US nor to heterosexuals. Marlene Arndt and Karina de Bruin's (2011) South African research supports international findings that bisexuals are rejected by both straights and gays, and that both straights and gays are prejudiced against bisexuals. And negative attitudes towards, and/or exclusion of, bisexuals in gay and/or lesbian communities are discussed with reference to the US by Robyn Ochs (1996), Amber Ault (1996) and Kelly D. Brooks and Kathryn Quina (2009), as well as in Australia by Kirsten McLean (2008).

obliviousness to the audience is belied by his unwarranted assumption that he monopolizes the audience's attention—the spotlight finds him, rather than him and Ryan—and by the delight in this attention that is imaged in the unlikely roaring crowd.

Mollie V. Blackburn and Caroline T. Clark (2011: 161) identify a need for YA literature “that represents queer people in communities”. Michael Cart (2004: n.p.) argues that explorations of “community and friendship” in YA books with LGBT characters are scarce. Cart and Christine A. Jenkins (2006: 178-184) describe the majority of LGBT children's and YA books as stories of “homosexual visibility”, a minority as tales of “gay assimilation”, and only very few as narratives of “queer consciousness or community”. *It's Our Prom* (Peters 2012) is therefore commendable for situating its several queer characters within a community of queer consciousness and allies, and nowhere is such community more evident than in the reaction of the audience to Luke and Ryan's kisses.

Yet, troublingly, these public kisses also link Luke's love of the spotlight directly with his sexuality. The narrative repeatedly calls his plural sexual desires into question. Consequently, lacking a clear signifier of his bisexuality, the novel instead marks him as bisexual by means of essentializing stereotype.

In *Double Feature* (Hartinger 2007), three friends, Russell, Min and Gunnar, act as extras in a zombie movie. The narrative describes the week of the shoot, first from the perspective of Russell, a gay boy, and then from the viewpoint of his bisexual friend, Min. Min's narrative centres on her relationship with a closeted

lesbian, Leah, whom she meets at the shoot, and on her uncertainties about being involved with someone who is in the closet.

Like *It's Our Prom* (Peters 2012), *Double Feature* (Hartinger 2007) situates its bisexual protagonist within a culture of queer consciousness and a supportive community of both queer and straight allies. Unfortunately, again like *It's Our Prom* (Peters 2012), it also stereotypes this protagonist as attention-seeking. Min and Leah's second kiss – in an empty stadium where, Min says, “the roar of a thousand invisible spectators cheered us on” (Hartinger 2007: 138) – tellingly echoes Luke and Ryan's second kiss. Min's spectators are nonreal, but her instinct to imagine them only strengthens the association between bisexuality and exhibition. By contrast, when Russell's boyfriend kisses him in public, he hesitates, aware that people are staring. Satisfying gay desire in public is thus presented as unfamiliar, exceptional, while the association of Min and Luke's bisexual kisses with an audience is presented as naturalized, essential. Significantly, this association between bisexuality and spectacle has already been naturalized in the person of Min. Russell says that she is: “pretty in-your-face. Example: she had recently put purple streaks in her hair. And she was bi and open about it” (Hartinger 2007: n.p.). Russell himself is openly gay, but is never characterized as attention-seeking, so it is Min's bi-ness, more than her openness, that is ‘in-your-face’.

A further correspondence between *It's Our Prom* (Peters 2012) and *Double Feature* (Hartinger 2007) is that, with their dual focalization, neither allows its bisexual voice to speak alone. It is remarkable that four of the thirteen YA books

with arguably bisexual protagonists published in English before 2012, as well as the series, limit and downgrade the voices of their bisexuals by means of a split focalization.<sup>36</sup> This suggests a view of the bisexual character as an inadequate focalizer, needing to be balanced by a more clearly normal voice: the lesbian voice of Azure or the gay voice of Russell, the voice of monosexuality, which makes gay and lesbian always more normal, and more normatively similar to straight, than bisexual. If these shared focalizations are literary attempts to marry form and content, then the content, by implication, includes a troubling impression of bisexuals as essentially split, fragmented, incomplete, evincing common stereotypes of bisexuals as confused and indecisive (see Erickson-Schroth & Mitchell 2009: 298; Yoshino 2000: 434; Israel & Mohr 2004: 121; Hutchins 1996: 241).

Where *It's Our Prom* (Peters 2012) downplays the plurality of Luke's sexual desires, *Double Feature* (Hartinger 2007) silences Min's sexual desires outright. Over the four published books of the series, Min is involved with two girls and one boy. In *Double Feature* (Hartinger 2007), the only volume in which she narrates, Min desires Leah only. This is a fair representation of many people's bisexuality over time, but because this is the only novel in which Min narrates, other-gender desires are incidentally silenced in her narrative. In any case, she thinks about both same- and other-gender attraction in social, rather than embodied, terms. Discussing what she is and is not attracted to, for example, she

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<sup>36</sup> In addition to *It's Our Prom* (Peters 2012) and *Double Feature* (Hartinger 2007), *Boyfriends with Girlfriends* (Sanchez 2011), *Postcards from No Man's Land* (Chambers 1999) and *Pretty Little Liars* (Shepard 2006) are also focalized from more than one perspective.

considers personality traits, and behavioural and fashion codes, that are associated in Western high school culture with particular social groups:

I hate the extremes: giggly girls with their catty backstabbing and frilly lace bras, and macho guys with their ridiculous swagger and stupid sex jokes. These people all seem like they're trying too hard. I like people who are comfortable in their own skin. I also like it when someone is confident and decisive and bold. (Hartinger 2007: 9)

These traits and codes suggest that Min finds social markers of mainstream popularity unattractive, and social markers of an individualistic resistance to the mainstream attractive. When Min first sees Leah, she describes Leah in a series of contrasts that represent further markers of these two opposed social groups.

She was tall but didn't slouch; had blond hair, but had pulled it back into a simple ponytail; and had smooth skin, but wore only lip gloss. Her navy jacket looked like something from the Civil War – Union, not Confederate – complete with brass buttons in front and actual epaulets on the shoulders.... Maybe it was the epaulets, but I couldn't keep my eyes off her. (Hartinger 2007: 11)

Despite her liking for boldness, Min appears to hate bold sexuality: what the giggliness, bras and swagger are “trying too hard” (Hartinger 2007: 9) to do is attract sexual attention; the jokes are stupid because they are jokes about sex. Leah's height, bloneness and skin place her in the frilly group that Min despises socially, because they mark her as conventionally pretty and draw attention to her potential as an object of sexual desire; her bra is not visible, but Min is later discomfited by her trendy, sexy pink thong (Hartinger 2007: 28-9). However, Leah also belongs among the bold people that Min desires socially: her upright posture shows confidence (and avoids flaunting her hips); her simple hairstyle and lack of makeup defy convention (and resist playing up her prettiness); her unique jacket asserts bold individuality (and covers her breasts and cleavage).

Min's initial interest in Leah is thus based on the social criteria she fulfils rather than on any embodied desire – especially as one of Min's unacknowledged social criteria is Leah's lack of sexual display. This attracts Min, in part, because she hopes that Leah's refusal to present herself in ways conventionally understood to appeal to the male gaze implies a preference for girls; she assesses Leah's cheerleading experience and thong – more markers of social convention – against her jacket and lack of makeup – both markers of social resistance – in order to judge whether or not Leah is “into girls” (Hartinger 2007: 29).

Yet the context of the rest of the narrative suggests that Leah's lack of sexual display also attracts Min precisely because Min herself exhibits a basic sexlessness. Sexual desire is conspicuously absent from Min's enumeration of Leah's points of attraction, or indeed from Min's decision-making. Min is hesitant about getting involved with Leah because Leah is closeted. As with her initial attraction to Leah, Min considers social, not sexual, criteria; for instance, she asks herself what it says about her if she dates someone who is not “honest and open about who they are” (Hartinger 2007: 58), and ponders whether she and Leah “are a good match” (Hartinger 2007: 120). After their first date she finds herself “dying to see Leah again” (Hartinger 2007: 49), but her narration skips over, perhaps does not know, why this might be so.

Even when Min and Leah do, at last, express their relationship through their bodies, their language evades the sexuality of this embodiment, rather choosing to emphasize, through an extended legal metaphor, the way in which it marks a social connection. Thus, after they agree that Min will not hide from Leah's

straight friends, Min says: “I think we’ve effectively completed our negotiations... Now if only we had some way to seal this agreement. Some way to consummate the arrangement” (Hartinger 2007: 125). They then consider signing a document or shaking hands before, finally, kissing. Their negotiations are undeniably flirtatious, but their archness epitomizes the narrative of the relationship as a whole: sexual desire is yet again overridden or obscured by the social. As if to underline the point, the same thing happens during the kiss itself, which is described as briefly, blandly and sexlessly as possible – “We kissed” (Hartinger 2007: 126) – and halted before they can “get too far” (Hartinger 2007: 127), since Leah’s friends are coming to visit her. Min does not express any disappointment about the interruption of this first kiss. Instead, she reserves any strong feelings for the cod legal social agreement that is evidently what really arouses her: “the terms of our agreement were about to be put to their first test!” (Hartinger 2007: 127). The final exclamation mark is the only indication of any excitement at this first kiss, but attaches this excitement to the social agreement that the kiss marks, rather than to the kiss itself as an embodiment of sexual desire.

Min and Leah’s second kiss is also presented in terms of sealing an agreement, rather than fulfilling a desire. In this case the agreement is love:

Here at last we could finally say what we couldn’t say in front of  
[Leah’s friends].  
“I love you,” Leah whispered.  
“I love you too,” I whispered back.  
We met in the kiss to end all kisses. (Hartinger 2007: 137-138)

These kisses may fulfil embodied desires, but Min’s choice of language – the first

kiss ends before they can get “too far,” rather than ‘any further’, let alone ‘as far as I wanted’ – undercuts such a reading, as does the ease with which Leah is distracted from her first-ever lesbian kiss. The redundancy of ‘at last’ and ‘finally’ might suggest the anticipated satiation of overwhelming, pent-up desire, but sexuality is determinedly sidelined when anticipation is spent in two declarations of love. The hyperbole of a ‘kiss to end all kisses’ emphasizes the importance of the second kiss, but, like the description of the first, in its fastidious avoidance of sensory or sensual specifics it absents itself from the realms of desire or sexuality: the ‘kiss to end all kisses’ is the ultimate expression of love, rather than of sexual embodiment. By comparison, before Russell kisses a boy called Kevin he is intensely aware of Kevin’s “body heat,” Kevin’s smell, his own “bone-dry” mouth; he says, “I could feel the sizzle of his electricity right in front of me, could hear it crackling”. He thinks about his absent boyfriend, but Kevin is physically present, “flesh and blood, and more” (Hartinger 2007: n.p.). Russell experiences his desires in the body, and their sexuality is evident in the sexual connotations of ‘body heat’, ‘bone’, ‘sizzle’, ‘electricity’ and ‘flesh’, and the implicit promise of ‘flesh and blood, and more’. If Min’s desires are sexual and embodied, then this sexual embodiment – unlike love, or social desires – is not something that the narrative wishes to share.

This silence, comparable in many ways to the obfuscation of Luke’s desires in *It’s Our Prom* (Peters 2012), desexualizes bisexuality. But the silence around Min’s embodied sexual attraction is perhaps more profound than the minimization of the sexuality of Luke’s desires – Luke is, after all, granted at least his goose bumps and erections, while it is difficult to characterize what Min feels for Leah

definitively as sexual desire. The silence of Min's body is that of a double erasure: the nullifying of plural desire *and* the nullifying of girls' desire. Both these erasures reinscribe the gendered constructions of teenage girls' sexuality as based, in Tolman's (2002a: 5) words, on "the desire for relationship and emotional connection" rather than on "sexual feelings in their bodies", and as lacking in the sexual desire "at the heart of sexual subjectivity". Tolman's (2002a) research shows both that these gendered constructions bear little relation to girls' lived experience, and that they make girls' sexuality more difficult to negotiate. The critique of heterosexual sex that Beth Younger (2009: 51) argues is common in lesbian YA novels, however, might suggest a more positive way of constructing teenage girls' sexuality. Younger argues that this critique "allows characters and readers the possibility of reimagining what better sex is, both for lesbians and heterosexuals. The lesbian YA novel depicts female sexual pleasure as a critique of male-centered heterosexist culture by portraying female sexual pleasure as cooperative and mutual." The contrast between Min's and Russell's desires suggests that the desire of the bisexual girl is something best evaded. If this is so, then the contrast between Min's sexless narrative and the lesbian YA novel, as described by Younger, in addition to the marked similarities between Min's story and that of Luke, in *It's Our Prom*, suggests that it is the bisexuality of such desire that compels this evasion.

However, key differences between Luke's and Min's narratives suggest that the femaleness of the desire of the bisexual girl is also a factor<sup>37</sup>. And the evasion of

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<sup>37</sup> This is not to diminish the force and importance of the bisexual erasure of boys and men. The erasure of bisexuals in general has several similarities to the

plural desire is arguably particularly worrying in relation to bisexuals who are girls. As *girls*, bisexual girls are already forced to make sense of their desires without the benefit of a substantial cultural discourse of these desires, and to negotiate the tension between pleasure and danger that pervades their sexuality. As *bisexuals*, it appears that these girls may find their desires evaded even within whatever insubstantial discourses of girls' desire they might find. The tension between pleasure and danger may be heightened for them because of the particular dangers of homophobic and biphobic violence, something that they are likely to be aware of: among the girls that Tolman (2002a: 185) interviewed, those who desired girls (including those who identified as bisexual), "spoke of multiple dangers [and] fear of physical harm". And bisexual girls may find the tensions of their girlhood sexuality further complicated by the particular importance that their desires appear to have for them: the bisexual and lesbian girls that Tolman (2002a: 184) interviewed "were more conscious of their sexual desire than many ... other girls; it was not only a significant but also an especially defining feature of their adolescence". Desexualizing bisexual girls may therefore affect their sense of self even beyond their gender and sexual identities.

*It's Our Prom* (Peters 2012) stereotypes Luke's bisexuality even while undermining his plural desires; *Double Feature* (Hartinger 2007) goes further, stereotyping, desexualizing, and effectively monosexualizing Min. In replacing plural sexual desire with essentializing stereotypes, both books reinforce the

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silencing and evasion of girls' desire, and the two are interlinked within heteronormative culture. The nuanced particularities of the silencing of bisexual boys and men's plural desires is an important topic that deserves a more thorough investigation than this thesis – with its focus on girls' desire in YA fiction – can provide.

belief that bisexuality is an essence that shapes and defines identity and is evidenced in certain fundamental characteristics – in these cases, attention seeking and confusion or indecision – rather than in sexual desire for people of more than one gender. Yet I have said that Hartinger and Peters must know that they are breaking new ground and potentially countering bisexual invisibility. Their books, to all appearances, are well-intentioned efforts to situate visible bisexual characters – and readers – within communities of queer consciousness, and these efforts are probably cherished by many teenagers. For, as Lee (1998: 158) argues in relation to young lesbians, “readers have found identification and community in even the most negative and conflicted lesbian texts by reading against dysphoric plots and making heroes out of unfortunate characters”; the same is likely true of some young bisexuals. Ideologically, these novels thus represent the middle ground between the extremes of empowerment and disempowerment in writing that gives voice to bisexual teenagers. I would like to consider now two examples of what exists on either margin of this valuable, well-intentioned, yet problematic middle ground.

### **The disempowering margin: essentializing stereotype and the irrelevance of bi/sexuality**

*Pink* is about an experimental period in the life of its protagonist, Ava, who wishes to try dating boys and replacing her alternative lesbian lifestyle with a preppy straight one. To facilitate this she begs her parents to let her change schools, and the novel begins with her lying to her girlfriend, Chloe, and

pretending that her parents have forced the change on her. She then lies to everyone at her new school, cheats on Chloe with a boy called Ethan, and, in her new double life, juggles old and new friends, hobbies and even clothes: boyish black outfits for her old identity, girly pastels for the one to which she aspires. When her two lives collide and her lies are exposed, she realizes that many of the people she most cares about are members of the stage crew for a school musical, who she at first dismissed sneeringly as neither coolly alternative, like Chloe, nor coolly preppy, like the popular crowd she tries to make friends with at her new school.

Despite all her efforts in the cause of dating boys, it is never clear whether or not Ava desires any boy sexually. Her initial idea that she might like dating boys is not related to any particular precipitating individual. Ethan, a boy at her new school, becomes the object of her interest only because a popular girl, with whom she wants to be friends, suggests that he would be an “eligible” boyfriend for her (Wilkinson 2009: 24). When Ethan’s sexual prowess is praised Ava realizes:

I hadn’t really thought about that side of things. I mean, I *wanted* a boyfriend. I did. I wanted to be normal and go to the school formal and wear a dress and for him to wear a tux and give me a corsage. But I hadn’t actually considered that I would *kiss* a boy, let alone have sex with one. (Wilkinson 2009: 36; original italics)

Her desire for Ethan is social, not sexual; when her defensive repetition that she wants a boyfriend sounds unconvincing, it is Ethan’s power to socially ‘normalize’ her through the clichés of teen romance – dance, dress, corsage, the very triteness of which underscores their normality – that she cites as evidence

of desire. And when she kisses him, it does little to clarify what her thoughts on kissing a boy, or indeed having sex with one, might be:

His mouth was hot and wet and much bigger than Chloe's mouth, so the kiss was messy. But I didn't mind. I was feeling messy. Messy and sexy. Ethan's hands were wandering all over my body. I wondered if anyone was watching us. I wasn't used to kissing like this in company.... I felt dizzy and trembly. (Wilkinson 2009: 124)

With the sexual connotations of 'hot' and 'wet', and in her 'messy', 'sexy' dizziness and trembling, Ava is clearly sexually aroused. It is less clear that it is Ethan that has aroused her. She has drunk two cocktails. Unused to kissing 'like this' in front of other people, her unaccustomed exhibitionism may be sexually exciting in itself. The public realization of all her social desires, as she dances with the popular crowd at one of their parties, may be a thrill that she experiences bodily. And she may also be aroused by the unfamiliar hypersexualization of her environment or the sexual displays of the pretty, popular girls, whose dancing resembles pole dancing and who rub up against the boys and titillate them with a performance of bisexuality. She notes naïvely, for example, that: "Those girls were doing things to each other that were *much, much* ruder than anything Chloe and I had ever done in the darkness and privacy of my bedroom", and wonders: "Was this really how straight girls got their kicks?"<sup>38</sup> (Wilkinson 2009: 122; original italics).

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<sup>38</sup> Megan R. Yost and Lauren McCarthy (2012: 22) suggest that this may indeed be how many straight girls and women get their kicks (with men). After conducting two studies, they report that a third of the heterosexual female college students in their first study had kissed other women in public, and that the most common portrayal of such kisses by women in their second study was as "a behavior that they themselves did not find pleasurable or desirable, but that they perceived as enjoyed by men".

After Ethan, Ava becomes interested in a boy from the stage crew, called Sam, but chooses friendship over a romantic or sexual relationship with him, perhaps because she experiences no embodied response to him. It is not only her sexual desires for boys that are uncertain, however. Although when she and Chloe first kissed, “things happened inside [her] that had never happened before” (Wilkinson 2009: 11), what she stresses repeatedly about their relationship is social triumph, not sexual awakening, saying of Chloe: “She was the coolest, sexiest, most interesting person I had ever met, and she had chosen me” (Wilkinson 2009: 12). Ava thinks at first that her not liking Ethan means that she is lesbian (Wilkinson 2009: 309), but eventually she realizes that her lack of feelings for Ethan and Chloe reveals nothing about whether her sexual desires lie with boys or with girls: Ethan is simply not “the *right* boy”, or Chloe “the *right girl*” (Wilkinson 2009: 309; original italics). But since there are no other characters in whom Ava is sexually interested, the narrative—like Ava—is hazy about her desires, evading sexual desire for Sam entirely and, with Ethan and Chloe, conflating lack of sexual desire with lack of love even while mixing social and sexual desires to the point where they are inseparable, perhaps indistinguishable.

True to stereotype (see Hutchins 1996: 241; Israel & Mohr 2004: 121-122; Erickson-Schroth & Mitchell 2009: 298; Ochs 2011: 172), Ava is portrayed as being bisexual because she is confused; also stereotypically, she is closeted, deceitful, disloyal, and undependable as either a friend or girlfriend, she betrays her lesbian community and politics, and she cheats on Chloe with Ethan largely to enjoy heterosexual privilege by passing as straight.

Ava's narrative suggests that it is irrelevant whether her desires are plural, or even sexual, in nature. Desire has been all but erased in her characterization, as in that of Min, in *It's Our Prom* (Peters 2012). But whereas Luke and Min are stereotyped as attention seeking and, possibly, confused and indecisive, Ava represents a catalogue of stereotypes that are far more despised and injurious. The antisocial essence these stereotypes cumulatively create replaces the habit of plural desire in identifying her as bisexual. She thus fills the bisexual space or gap in the lives of teenage readers with the most disempowering of compromises: she suggests that bisexuality is a form of identity, with all the restrictions and prescriptions that this entails, but without the sense of belonging and community associated with shared identity; and she represents the belief that bisexuality determines something essential about character, with all the reductiveness and prejudiciality associated with notions of essence, but without the compensating experience of validation that may follow from an understanding of sexual preference as a genetically determined, or *biologically* essential, characteristic.

### **The empowering margin: bi, sexual, individual**

*Empress of the World* (Ryan 2001) takes place on a holiday programme for gifted youth, where Nic, the first-person protagonist, is studying archaeology. It is a character-driven novel with a slight plot: Nic falls in love with a girl called Battle, but Battle soon ends their relationship and Nic is heartbroken. After a time, however, they are reconciled.

There are four important ways in which this love story takes a more promising approach to bisexuality than the novels so far discussed. The first is that Nic's narrative never desexualizes her desire. The sexual attraction between her and Battle is, in fact, so palpable that it shocks a mutual friend to discover that they are not yet physically intimate (Ryan 2001: n.p.). Whereas Min's worry, in *Double Feature* (Hartinger 2007), about whether Leah is a 'good match' is social, Nic's worry that Battle might read her mind as she pictures Battle showering is undeniably sexual. Nic is intimately conscious of Battle's physical presence; when Battle does a headstand her first thought is of the risk – and hope – that Battle's breasts may be exposed; when Battle gives her something she has hidden in a scarf tied around her thigh, under her jodhpurs, Nic "can't stop thinking about where this something has been" (Ryan 2001: n.p.), and her hands shake with arousal at the thought, and the warmth of the scarf heated between Battle's legs.

The 'something' is wine, its purpose, seduction. Unlike Min and Leah's, Nic and Battle's consummation is sexual; unlike Min's bald statement that she and Leah kiss, with its delicate neglect of the sensory, Nic's description of "all those steps [they] haven't taken yet" (Ryan 2001: n.p.) is uncompromisingly sensuous. The wine makes everything "blurry and soft until all that's left is sensations", blurry softness suggesting the femininity of her and Battle's bodies, the sensations of touch, scent and sound centred on the parts of the body most used for physical contact: "cool night air on skin, hands and mouths moving over each other, the scent of pine mixed with lavender, the sound of breath" (Ryan 2001: n.p.). Afterwards, they are reprimanded for breaking a curfew and asked if they think

they made a good choice. Older readers may interpret Nic's response, "Yes, yes, yes" (Ryan 2001: n.p.), as recalling earlier orgasm, and may read an enthusiastic allusion to frottage or tribadism between the lines of her wordplay a few days later, when a friend comments that she and Battle "are rubbing off on each other". In response, she cackles, "every chance we get!" (Ryan 2001: n.p.).

The second way in which the novel takes a more promising approach to bisexuality is by avoiding the conflation of sexual desire with social desire, or with love. Nic's ecstatic "Yes, yes, yes" is introduced with the words "Yes, I think, remembering Battle's arms around me" (Ryan 2001: n.p.); this memory thus implies pleasure in both their physical and their emotional closeness. But the two are intertwined, not conflated. Nic loves Battle, and she desires her. In the same way as for Bella, in *Twilight* (Meyer 2005; 2006; 2007; 2008), desire appears first, and then co-exists with love rather than being subsumed in it. After Battle leaves Nic, Nic and a boy called Isaac, whose parents are divorcing, seek mutual comfort in a kiss. She later thinks:

I can remember standing in his arms, afterwards, crying, but the kiss itself is like something I saw in a movie. Whereas everything that happened with Battle has been seared into my brain with a branding iron. Does that mean I'm definitely a lesbian, not bisexual, or just that I love Battle and I only like Isaac? (Ryan 2001: n.p.)

Nic remembers the emotional comfort of being held, but distances herself from sexual intimacy with Isaac by positioning herself as a passive observer of their kiss. In the extravagant metaphor that she uses to compare the fixity of her memories of Battle to being branded, however, the image of a searing branding iron gives a raw physicality to her emotional pain, highlighting the embodiment

of their relationship even as the sexual and emotional are conflated in 'everything that happened'. With Isaac she implicitly assumes that emotional and physical closeness are separable, but with Battle she considers the possibility that love makes the two inextricable. In contrast to Ava in *Pink* (Wilkinson 2009), however, Nic immediately recognizes the complexity of the interrelationship between love and desire, and resists the simplicity of merging them, answering her own question: "Maybe you don't get to know, Nic. Maybe you need to stop trying to pick it all apart" (Ryan 2001: n.p.).

The third promising aspect of the novel's approach to bisexuality is its representation of Nic's desires as unambiguously plural. Despite her overwhelming desire for Battle, Nic concludes that she is bisexual, not lesbian, because she has "liked boys before" and, she says, "probably will again" (Ryan 2001: n.p.). It is true that her desires for boys, like Min's, are never enacted in the novel. Also, her question about whether Isaac's kiss is forgettable because she is lesbian recalls Ava's assumption that she is lesbian because of her lack of feeling for Ethan. But there is no suggestion that Nic and Isaac's kiss expresses anything more than a need for and offer of comfort, and Nic is aware that it reflects merely "a desperate desire for everything to become boy/girl simple" (Ryan 2001: n.p.) after she loses Battle. There is good reason to think of Isaac in the same way that Ava comes to think of Ethan: as simply not "the *right* boy" (Wilkinson 2009: 309; original italics). Similarly, there is good reason to interpret the verb 'like', in the clause 'I only like Isaac', not the way teenagers customarily use it, to imply attraction, but literally, and therefore sexlessly. Whereas the social impetus of Ava's desire for Ethan represents a blurring of the lines of the sexual and social

in her desires for boys collectively, Isaac's kiss cannot be generalized to reveal anything about Nic's aggregated desires, sexual or social, for boys.

Rather, the plurality of her sexual desires is revealed in her past feelings for André, a boy she says she spent all the previous year "trying desperately to attract" (Ryan 2001: n.p.). On the face of it this implies that she was attracted to him but, as *Pink* (Wilkinson 2009) suggests, there are social advantages to girls in winning boys, so in the absence of other evidence her language could be seen as equivocal. Other evidence is however present, in her characterization. After sex, Nic subjects Battle to a barrage of questions. When Battle asks why she has to take everything apart, she replies, "So I can figure out how it fits together" (Ryan 2001: n.p.). This explanation makes sense when we consider Nic's dream of being an archaeologist. She is taught that archaeology is "the art of sorting through the fragments that people have left behind, and trying to draw conclusions about their lives and their cultures based on those fragments" (Ryan 2001: n.p.), and she imagines that, as an archaeologist, she will be able to "analyze artifacts" (Ryan 2001: n.p.) for the rest of her life. Archaeology, for her, is about careful analysis of 'fragments' to understand people and to uncover and recover their lives, and she understands language to be integral to this analysis: a homework assignment teaches her the importance of an objective written description of an artefact, and she knows that the final product of archaeological analysis has to be written, telling two racist and homophobic students sarcastically: "Boy, you guys are going to make super archaeologists. You'll write really sensitive analyses of oppressed cultures" (Ryan 2001: n.p.). The inclination to uncover, to discover, to recover that draws her to archaeology, as well as her

archaeological training, drives her to use words to uncover the human story behind the fragments of a life. She uses words to dissect and lay bare, not to submerge and obfuscate; to read her as equivocal would be to read against her character.

The two instances in which she mentions André arise in the context of an attempt to contextualize, and thus make sense of, her attraction to Battle. She thinks back to a girl called Rachel, whom she used to be attracted to, and then admits to herself that Rachel is “not the whole story” (Ryan 2001: n.p.): her desire for Rachel coincided with the year she spent trying to attract André. She mentions him because she is trying, uncertainly, to interpret these simultaneous gender-plural attractions, and to work out what they mean in relation to her growing desire for Battle. This is an excavation and scrutiny of her own history, with an analysis of fragments of her past and an attempt to put them together to uncover the human story of her own life. It suggests an archaeological, longitudinal approach, which necessarily accommodates the inconclusiveness and incompleteness of her experience, to the interpretation of gender-plural desire. Her discussion of André is peripheral, and fails to reify sexual desire for boys. But her direct engagement with the plurality of her desires nevertheless implies the very opposite of calling them into question as, for example, *It's Our Prom* (Peters 2012) does with Luke's desires.

Finally, the novel takes a promising approach to bisexuality in that its portrayal of Nic's plural desires is situated within a nuanced exploration of the ambiguities and uncertainties of bisexuality, and of the interplay between sexuality and other

factors that shape lives and character. Where the confusion that leads to most of Ava's problems is presented as essential to her bisexuality, Nic's problem (Battle's leaving her) is idiosyncratic: Battle finds the intimacy of Nic's constant archaeological scrutiny and analysis frightening. Not an archaeology student, she finds Nic's obsession with the fragments of Battle's life, and Nic's desire to piece these fragments together to uncover the story behind them, invasive; she compares it to vivisection (Ryan 2001: n.p.). Ava's confusion is resolved with laughable simplicity: Sam asks why she has to choose between being straight and being lesbian, which makes her realise that it "feels good" to acknowledge that she does not know who she likes (Wilkinson 2009: 309), and this apparently settles all that has confused her during the novel. By comparison, Nic interrogates not only her own feelings, but also a number of other things: the concept of bisexuality itself, the value of such labels, and how they might be related to notions of identity and essence. Contemplating being called a "*dyke*" (Ryan 2001: n.p.; original italics), for example, she thinks, "*it's just odd—what has changed about me, that makes these people now want to call me this name?*" (Ryan 2001: n.p.; original italics). She recognizes that the label is 'odd' because nothing essential about her has changed: there is no direct causal connection between her desires and her identity.

Nic's voice and analyses are oblique, but the informal archaeological field note with which I began this chapter exemplifies the depth and range of her inquiry. The statement "*bisexual is a weird word*" (Ryan 2001: n.p.; original italics), as discussed above, hints at the status of both word and concept. The observation that "*it sounds like you have to buy sex*" (Ryan 2001: n.p.; original italics) suggests

traces of a cultural distaste for bisexuality, and an association with promiscuity, while *“it could be one of those one-celled creatures that you study in biology”* (Ryan 2001: n.p.; original italics) dehumanizes, and positions bisexuals as other, specimen, object. An imaginary teacher announcing that *“today, class, we will study the life cycle of the bisexual”* (Ryan 2001: n.p.; original italics) reiterates this dehumanization by reducing ‘the bisexual’ to a different species, and consideration of its life cycle recalls Nic’s earlier interrogations of herself as bisexual, and what it means for her future, or says about her past, if she is. The devastating final comment, *“oh, I thought those were extinct”* (Ryan 2001: n.p.; original italics), confronts one of the key stereotypes used to undermine Luke’s claims to bisexuality in *It’s Our Prom* (Peters 2012) – the idea that bisexuals do not exist – as it probes the space created by bisexual invisibility, and, in the emotive word ‘extinct’, links this space to a connotative trace of humanity’s collective sadness and shame in relation to species we have exterminated. Enclosing the whole passage in square brackets suggests the way society marginalizes ‘the bisexual’, and so locates the responsibility for distaste, dehumanization, invisibility, sadness, and shame within this marginalization.

I have characterized Nic’s voice as being both oblique and unequivocal. This apparent contradiction springs from a narrative recognition of the complexity of experience, and the delusiveness of attempts to capture it within reductive essentialist terms. In a similar way, Nic’s careful exploration of what she desires and how this might relate to her identity springs from a narrative recognition of an “uncertainty about how to interpret concurrent sexual attractions to both women and men” that, according to Fox (1996: 29), is experienced by many

bisexuals. Whereas Ava, in *Pink* (Wilkinson 2009), is stereotypically confused because she does not know what she wants, Nic's uncertainty arises out of her attempt to make sense of new territory for which the more familiar scripts of monosexuality are unsuited. Another way of expressing this might be to say that her character – unlike those of Luke, Min or Ava – is too fully rounded, too individually specific, to be reducible to stereotype, as the habit of desire she represents is too various in its expression.

### **Reshaping the margins**

What emerges from my comparison of the middle ground of Peters (2012) and Hartinger (2007) and the margin represented by Wilkinson is that, ideologically speaking, the middle ground in published bisexual narratives for teenagers is distinguishable from its disempowering margin only by degree. Neither very bi nor particularly sexual, novels in both these categories are alike in evading the plurality and the sexuality of bisexuality, often submerging them under stereotyped essence. And when the bisexual desire that is evaded is that of a girl, the evasion is compounded by the pre-existing evasion of her desire in the absence of a significant cultural (or fictive) discourse of girls' desire.

Despite these shortcomings, the novels of the middle ground discussed here are valuable for their depictions of supportive communities of queer people and straight allies. In addition, the middle ground is more likely than the margin to recognize a (small) role for either the plurality or the sexuality of bisexual

desires. Most significantly, it upholds fewer or less egregious stereotypes of what is seen as bisexual essence. Replacing what is definitive about bisexuality with what is merely social construction, however, novels in both categories, to a greater or lesser extent, underpin the very invisibility, enact the very erasure, that they ostensibly resist.

I have suggested that YA novels could, potentially, help bisexual teenagers interpret their plural desires, and help fill the bisexual spaces or gaps in their worlds with fictional communities. However, if this potential is to be realized then the middle ground will have to distinguish itself more materially from its disempowering margin – for example, by providing more nuanced and rounded characters, like Nic in *Empress of the World*, in order to recognize the variety and individuality of teenagers who sexually desire people of more than one gender. Moreover, the fictional communities that the middle ground creates will need to offer bisexual readers the sense of validation associated with being part of a community, without imposing on them the limitations of an offensive, essential identity; Ryan’s novel suggests one way to do this, in the way that it raises pertinent questions about the relationship of sexual preference to both essence and identity, as well as acknowledging the plurality of Nic’s desires and representing their sexuality prominently. Without such an approach, the bisexual YA narrative is little more than a titillating oddity that reinforces damaging stereotypes and is complicit, albeit unintentionally, in keeping bisexual teenagers – particularly bisexual girls, whose desires would be silenced and problematized even if they were not plural – in the margins, invisible.

## **THE WRONG BODY FOR DESIRE**

## ***Girl Re-Membered***

*There was a Christmas party at my Sunday School teacher's house. I hadn't registered that it was a pool party and hadn't brought my swimming costume. "No problem!" said the other little girls, our teacher, her mom and dad and visiting uncle who were braaiing by the pool, "Just jump in in your panties." I remember trying to find the means, within the limits of my expressive and conceptual thinking skills, to keep my clothes on and dry without anyone guessing that if I were naked or my top were wet then my little breasts would show. But I had only recently turned eight, and the limits of my mental and verbal agility were considerable. I remember my mind racing and feeling wretched; I remember repeating weakly that there was a Special Reason that I couldn't take off my dress. With a time machine I would go back and tell my young self not to worry: my body was so far outside the experience of anyone else there that nobody was going to guess my Special Reason anyway. I don't have a time machine, so instead I simply feel my heart beating harder and faster, even 35 years later, as I write this small trauma down.*

*I remember my first period. Nine years old, too young to know what was happening. A quick explanation from my mom that left me still confused, too scared to wash myself because I thought the soap would sting, as on an open wound. The shame of this thing that none of the other girls had, that presumably many of them didn't even know about, as I hadn't known. The dirty imperative of secrecy to which I held myself long, long after most of the other girls must have begun their own periods. The years of lying to a PE teacher via my mother once a month:*

*Dear Miss Simon*

*Bonnie cannot swim today because she has a cold.*

*Yours faithfully  
A. Kneen (Mrs)*

*I don't remember ever feeling bad about those lies. The relief of a periodic break from the horrors of trying to wriggle my way furtively into and out of my school dress and PE clothes or swimming costume without any of the other girls, running around the change room in nothing but their panties, seeing my breasts was too great to admit of qualms. And if I had had any, they would have ended the day Miss Simon joined – or, as it seemed, given her relative size and authority – led the whole class in laughter at the crazy bounce and flap of my breasts the day I came to the field late, and running. Some long-ago sadist had decreed that our school dresses be sleeveless, ensuring that everyone would be able to see the straps if I dared wear a bra, so I preferred to squash my chest flat in a too-small dress with no darts and no breath, which may or may not have hidden what I had but left me unprotected and unsupported, in more ways than one, in a T-shirt for PE.*

*I remember the shape, in the dark, of the brat – a stranger, and at least a head shorter and a year or two younger than me, which somehow made it worse, made me more pathetic in my own eyes – who felt me up in a movie theatre: the paralysing shame, the determination to convince myself that he didn't realize what he was doing and that if I could just shift into a less accessible position then it would retroactively never have happened, and eventually the anger that made me*

*swap seats with the friend I was with. She was normal and had no breasts yet; we were both sure that she would be fine next to him, and we were right.*

*I looked forward hopefully to high school, when all the girls would have breasts and wear bras, when my two breasts could just blur into the mass of one thousand others. And, in the beginning, it was better even than I had dreamed, with a first PE class in which the teacher casually and matter-of-factly dropped the glorious bombshell that if we couldn't swim because we had our periods then she just needed a note from our moms to tell her.*

*But my breasts weren't just early; they were also gross; they did not blur into anything. I remember the instantaneous death of my long-held crush on a particular boy when my class passed his in the corridors and he yelled to a friend: "Look! It's Bonnie – the chick with the huge tits!" I remember walking into the art room with my class to hear an older boy whom I did not know and had never before spoken to shout across the room, "Hey! Bonnie! Come sit on my face!" and I remember the embarrassment when I didn't really understand what he was implying, and then the shame when the boys in my class looked at me in a certain way, and I figured it out. I remember the name of the boy who, with his cronies, sang the theme song for a bikini contest every single time I passed them in the corridors. And of course I remember the names of each of the three boys who at one time or another grabbed my breasts uninvited at school. One looked aggressive and cocky as he did it; another aggressive and threatening; and one, whom I thought of as a friend and – so help me! – continued to think of in that way throughout school, looked simply disappointed. He was a huge boy with big hands, and threw casually*

*over his shoulder as he loped off that he guessed he was never going to find a handful after all. This casual distance was the one thing the three all shared: they showed me clearly that my body was an invitation, perhaps even an imperative, and that to accept its invitation or submit to its imperative was a small, forgettable moment for each one – perhaps something akin to saying yes when an acquaintance asked if they were going for a smoke behind the art class, or if they would be at cricket practice that afternoon.*

*I remember all the adults who must have seen me – who had no choice but to see me – but who chose not to consider what it might mean to look as I did. Miss Simon, and all the teachers like her. A paediatrician who invariably left me sitting in nothing but my panties throughout his humiliating examinations, but never thought to mention to my mother that sooner rather than later might be best when it came to telling an eight-year old with breasts about menstruation. The random uncles and colleagues and friends who told my father that he was going to have to buy a shotgun for the boys; they were aiming for a compliment, I suppose, but I was never a pretty enough child for that to be the reason boys might become a nuisance. I understand that adults didn't know how to respond to a body like mine but felt that some response was called for; if I'm honest, there are photos of me as a girl that make me uncomfortable now. But I simply don't care about those adults' discomfiture; my own was so very much greater, and so very often caused by theirs.*

*I remember a lot of things. With all that I remember, it isn't strange that my imperative, invitational breasts continued to shape me, even after not only my own, but all the other girls', growing was done. It isn't strange that I learned early*

*that I could limit the sting for me and the amusement for others if I joked my own boob joke before anyone else could joke theirs – and then later that I could control the discomfiting situation produced by my body if I could be always the one who spoke loudest and most confidently about anything to do with bodies and their sexuality. (Good grief! Is it possible that I’m writing this thesis about sexuality and desire as a now-habitual defence mechanism against other people’s responses to what they once seemed to see as the imperative of my breasts?) It isn’t strange that I thought any boy or, later, man who liked my breasts must be a pervert, that I made it a point to ask boys whom I liked what body type they preferred, that I preferred for nearly a decade and a half after I acquired my breasts to know that I was with someone who tolerated, rather than delighted in, them. After all, for the first several years of their existence, just as I was becoming familiar with them, anyone who delighted in them would indeed have been a pervert.*

*Contrary to stereotype for the kind of girl known at primary school as Dolly Parton, I was a bookish reader, far prouder at twelve of being Head Librarian than of being a prefect. Loving books so much, I searched and searched to find one that showed a girl like me, with a body too hasty and too busty like mine, who was a heroine and a focalizer rather than a peripheral object of dislike, disgust or envy. It was such a betrayal never to find such a book then, and such a fragile and nervous joy to find one, finally, now, three decades and more too late. Elizabeth Acevedo (2018: n.p.) dedicates *The Poet X* to, among others, “all the little sisters yearning to see themselves: this is for you”. I think perhaps – probably – she means Dominican-American little sisters, or the little sisters of Spanish Harlem and similar urban neighbourhoods, or even the little sisters in the world of poetry slam. But reading*

*her book I unexpectedly find my time machine; I remember things I have not thought of, feel things I have not felt, in years. In The Poet X, I see one particular defining aspect of myself in a novel for the very first time in my life. This is a part of myself that I have been 'yearning to see'. This is a book that feels as if it is for me.*

## Chapter Seven

### A Discomfited Lacuna: The Early-Developing Girl

#### Without YA Fiction

The body of the typical heroine of young adult (YA) fiction is unremarked and implicitly unremarkable. This may often be, at least in part, owing to a conscious attempt on the writer's part to write a character that diverse readers can relate to, with nothing either so specific or so unusual that it would exclude many from identifying with the heroine. This is a strategy similar to the one in which YA heroines frequently describe themselves as neither very ugly nor outstandingly pretty, turning them into a sort of Everygirl who can represent, and invite identification from, anybody and everybody.

But, however well-intentioned the writer, an unremarkable body is, in fact, far from any or every body. Beth Younger (2009: 5) points out that, in YA novels, when "the race of a character is not specifically named, white is assumed."

Similarly, she says, if there is no reference to a character's weight:

the reader assumes a "normal" – read "thin" – weight. Most often weight is mentioned only if the character is considered abnormal, i.e., fat or chubby, or if the character is thin as a reminder of the importance of being slender. Women and girls who are heavy are *always* identified as such. Even in otherwise progressive books, the fat person is marked as "other".

A heroine whose colour, weight, health and ability, genitalia, and breasts are not explicitly referred to or unequivocally implied is, by default, read as white, thin,

healthy, able-bodied and cisgender, with average-sized breasts that developed around the usual age. And this is indeed how most YA heroines are (to be) read. Whiteness, thinness, health, able-bodiedness, cisgender and average-breastedness are typically presented as invisible, and thus as normal, in YA books. In this, the books perform a normalizing and normative function upon their readers, whose three options when reading YA writing are thus to have the kinds of bodies that are represented as unremarkable and invisible, to force their bodies into an approximation of these kinds of bodies, or to continually read against themselves as embodied beings. And for girls of colour, overweight girls, chronically or terminally ill girls, disabled girls, transgender girls, and conspicuous-breasted girls – that is, large-breasted girls, or girls who developed breasts early – the problems inherent in such reading are acute, because it is almost impossible in Western culture for such girls to avoid a pressing, critical, definitive sense of their own embodiment.

### **Overembodied identities**

For conspicuous-breasted girls, this is because their bodies are always remarkable (and remarked upon), and in obtrusively drawing attention to themselves and their sexuality, are routinely understood, by adults and by peers, both to invite and to signify sexual desire.<sup>39</sup> If, as I have argued in previous

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<sup>39</sup> The intersections of the bodies, desires, and books written for and about girls of colour, overweight girls, chronically or terminally ill girls, disabled girls, and transgender girls are an important area of research, but are beyond the scope of

chapters, heterosexual girls' sexual desires are consistently problematized and routinely silenced by patriarchal and chastity cultures, by postfeminist discourses, and even by some iterations of feminist thought that focus on sexual danger to the exclusion of pleasure, then to be a girl with such a body is to be always and unavoidably outside the bounds of acceptability, even before any actual experience of desire, and certainly after it. With bodies always already sexualized, regardless of their own sexual feelings or lack of such feelings, such girls in our culture, I would argue, almost inevitably experience their bodies – and most particularly their breasts – as defining their identities, and positioning them socially, in a particularly conscious way and to a particularly marked degree.

The fifteen-year-old Dominican-American heroine of Elizabeth Acevedo's verse novel *The Poet X* (Acevedo 2018) is such a girl: since Xiomara – X – was eleven (Acevedo 2018: 151, 40), her body has attracted unlooked-for and unwelcome attention from boys and men, as well as an assumption of hypersexuality from her excessively strict Catholic mother. X tells her story through the medium of her poetry and a few of her English homework assignments. In 'Unhide-able' (Acevedo 2018: 5), she describes precisely how her body has defined her identity and positioned her socially.

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this thesis and, as discussed in Chapter One, excluded by the limitations of its partly autoethnographic method.

## Unhide-able

I am unhide-able.

Taller than even my father, with what Mami has always said was “a little too much body for such a young girl.”

I am the baby fat that settled into D-cups and swinging hips so that the boys who called me whale in middle school now ask me to send them pictures of myself in a thong.

The other girls call me conceited. Ho. Thot. Fast.

When your body takes up more room than your voice you are always the target of well-aimed rumors, which is why I let my knuckles talk for me.

Which is why I learned to shrug when my name was replaced by insults.

I’ve forced my skin just as thick as I am.

With the opening words “I am”, X explicitly equates her selfhood with “the baby fat that settled into D-cups and swinging hips”. Her sense of self is one with her large breasts and round hips, and with her body’s history of early puberty, which she perceives as having emerged directly from baby fat, without a detour through childhood. This unity of body and self is, however, not a harmonious one. Her body now defines her identity and self, and she is engaged in a constant, long-term power struggle with it, and thus, unwinnably, with herself. She experiences her body as overbearing, displacing her: she is a quiet girl, and her body “takes up more room” than her voice. In a later poem, ‘Another Thing You Think While You’re Kneeling on Rice That Has Nothing to Do with Repentance:’ (Acevedo 2018: 211), she describes how her mother used to call her “premio” (reward, or trophy), and writes:

And I loved being her reward.  
The golden trophy of her life.  
I just don’t know when I got too big

for the appointed pedestal.

Again, her overbearing body – the bigness of her breasts and hips, rather than her age or height – displaces an identity, and one that she loved. Her body is too big in the room for her voice to be heard, too big in the breast and hip for a mother to rejoice in and be proud of.

X has responded to her body's colonization of her identity by forcing her skin to become "just as thick" as she is. But because the colonizer is her own body, her force must be exerted upon herself: the thick-skinned social persona she has constructed forcibly silences her already-quiet voice in favour of her fists. And in the claim "I've forced my skin just as thick as I am", she once again equates her body and her self: in this equation there is bleak contempt in the word "thick", with which she bluntly dismisses both body and self, one as fat, the other as stupid.

She is not the only one who identifies herself and her body as one, and her body positions her as an othered outsider long before she develops her thick-skinned facade. As her voice and her identity have been displaced by her body, so her name has been "replaced by insults." Other girls call her "conceited. Ho. Thot. Fast." She is "always the target of well-aimed rumors". This is a bitter irony. Her "unhide-able" body may draw attention but, far from conceited, X implies in her poem and its title a wish that she and her body were indeed able to be hidden; she feels that her voice is silenced by her body; she still sees baby fat inscribed in her curves. Far from either inviting or expressing sexual desire, far from a sexually promiscuous girl – a ho, a thot, or fast – at nearly sixteen X has never kissed a boy (Acevedo 2018: 28), never yet wanted any of the many things that

boys and men have told her they would like to do to her body (Acevedo 2018: 146). Rumours about her are aimed like arrows at a target, because their purpose is violence, rather than gossip for its own sake; her behaviour does not provide the fodder to support gossip for its own sake. Her body is always read as an invitation: by boys, as an invitation to voyeuristic sexual demands, by girls, as an invitation to cruel sexual slurs and lies.

The poem suggests that others seem to find it impossible not to respond to an “unhide-able” body. For the viewer, such a body is always remarkable, always demanding to be remarked upon. For the inhabitant, such a body is always constraining, always preventing an identity or position independent or distinct from it.

### **A conspicuous lacuna**

The particularly embodied, particularly breasted experience of identity and social positioning of a girl such as X is currently shared by far more girls than before, as there are far more conspicuous-breasted girls than there were before: research suggests not only that most girls in Western societies are developing breasts earlier than they used to, but also that there are far more girls developing breasts unusually early than was previously the case. In 1997 Marcia E. Herman-Giddens et al. (1997: 509, 511) published a landmark article in *Pediatrics*, in which they found that the girls in their study were beginning puberty earlier than in the past (on average around the ages of eight and nine among African-

American girls, and by ten among white girls), and that there were substantially more girls than in the past who had begun puberty by the age of eight, the traditional limit for referral to a paediatric endocrinologist for suspected precocious puberty (see Kaplowitz & Bloch 2016: e2). Specifically, Herman-Giddens et al. (1997: 509) found that more than five per cent of white, and more than a quarter of African-American, girls in their study showed some breast and/or pubic hair development before the age of eight.

Herman-Giddens's findings have been almost entirely ignored by the children's and YA book world. When I was nine or ten years old, I began what has become a lifelong search for children's books about girls experiencing early puberty, and YA books about girls who had experienced it. For over three decades, sometimes in passing and sometimes more actively, I have been searching in libraries and bookstores, and latterly on databases, forums and websites, and in children's literature scholarship. In that time I have come across some books with peripheral early developers: Laura Danker, the outcast eleven-year-old who is, frustratingly, used merely to provide the flat-chested heroine and reader with an object lesson in empathy and compassion in Judy Blume's (1970) *Are You There, God? It's Me, Margaret* is almost certainly the best known.

But I have so far found only two novels in English with main characters who develop early. There may be other YA novels with early-developing protagonists, but it would appear that they are neither well known nor easily accessible. *Crooked Lines*, by RF Tyminski (2016), is a self-published novel about a young boy who develops puberty early as a side effect of corticosteroid treatment for

Bell's palsy. And in *The Poet X* (Acevedo 2018), which won the 2018 National Book Award for Young People's Literature, X tells the story of her struggle to balance her mother's rigid and oppressive sexual morality, her own doubts about her faith, and her developing relationship with and nascent sexual desire for Aman, a boy in her biology class. Things come to a head when her mother finds out about Aman, punishes X violently, burns her poetry notebook, and grounds her indefinitely, and Aman fails to stand up for her against a boy who gropes and squeezes her rear at school the next day. But X eventually finds comfort, a sense of fellowship and belonging, and a voice in slam poetry. With the help of her priest and her English teacher, this enables her to reconstruct her family relationships and her relationship with Aman, and to help her isolated family, in turn, integrate into a supportive community of friends.

X is an informative focus point. Her poems are nuanced and illuminating illustrations of the dry two-dimensional findings of quantitative and qualitative research, and in this chapter I discuss three of them, briefly, as such. My focus, however, is on the lack of YA books about girls such as X that is the norm, rather than on the solitary title that is the exception. I wish to consider critically what is not, and why it is not, rather than what – anomalously – is, because the lacuna that makes X a unique heroine is difficult to explain.

It is true that precocious puberty, and even early normal puberty, would, by definition, take place at a far younger age than that of any likely YA heroine. But there is a wealth of influential (if sometimes questionable) speculation, both in research and popularly, that early puberty must lead to a variety of adverse

psychosocial and psychosexual outcomes in girls, most of which imply consequences well into the teens. Mari S. Golub et al. (2008: S220) suggest, for example, that children who begin puberty early are “at risk for sexual abuse or for early sexual debut (ie, age of first sexual intercourse) with its attendant consequences in girls.” A *Time* magazine cover article (Lemonick 2000: 4) claims, similarly, that the “physical dangers of sexual harassment and sexually transmitted diseases – and, for those who start menstruating early as well, pregnancy – are only the most obvious consequences of premature development.” There is also a body of quantitative research that suggests that early puberty is in fact associated with various psychosocial outcomes that have effects that last well into the teens. Jane Mendle et al. (2007: 151, 155, 156, 158, 159, 160; my italics) synthesize “research on negative psychological sequelae of early pubertal timing in *adolescent* girls” and find associations with depression, body dissatisfaction, substance abuse, earlier sexual behaviour and intercourse, and delinquent behaviour. Therése Johansson and E. Martin Ritzén (2005: 130-131) find in their ‘Very Long-Term Follow-Up of Girls with Early and Late Menarche’ that:

At age 15-16, those with menarche before age 11 were more delinquent, were more often in conflict with parents and teachers, used more of alcohol and drugs and they had more advanced sexual experiences. They were also more often registered for criminal offences.

Johansson & Ritzén (2005: 132) state, furthermore, that in “mid-adolescence, girls with early menarche significantly more often had advanced opposite sex relations, often with an older male.” Such research suggests not only that early puberty in childhood affects lived experience in teenagers, but also that it affects

it in ways that have traditionally been much of the bread and butter of YA writers. It cannot be argued either that early puberty has been rendered irrelevant to teenage YA readers by the passage of time, or that it fails to generate any interesting possibilities of theme, plot, character or – in the historical tradition of YA fiction – problem. (Research aside, this much is, I think, amply illustrated by ‘Unhideable’ (Acevedo 2018: 5), the poem briefly discussed earlier in this chapter.)

It is also difficult to explain the silence of YA writers on early puberty with reference to the relatively small number of children who experience it. There are more teenagers who have experienced precocious puberty than there are transgender teenagers<sup>40</sup>, and still more teenagers whose puberty was notably early, even if not clinically precocious. Yet, for comparison with Acevedo’s lone reputedly published title engaging in 2018 with early puberty in its heroine, the first YA novel about a transgender main character, Julie Anne Peters’s *Luna*, was published in 2004. And, at the time of writing, the Barnes and Noble bookstore website lists ‘10 Great YA Novels with Transgender/Nonbinary Main Characters’ (Adler 2017) published from 2014 to 2017 alone. This is a heartening and necessary development, and entirely appropriate and natural to a genre that is rooted in the issue-based problem novel. But it does beg the question of the

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<sup>40</sup> According to G. Nicole Rider et al. (2018: n.p.) 2.7 per cent of the 80 929 students surveyed in the statewide Minnesota Student Survey of 2016 identified as transgender or gender nonconforming. By comparison, Herman-Giddens et al. (1997: 509) found, as stated above, that more than five per cent of white, and more than a quarter of African-American, girls in their study had begun puberty before the age of eight.

startling absence of any mention of precocious, or even early, puberty among YA heroines outside of *The Poet X* (Acevedo 2018).

This absence is particularly remarkable in a field of publishing that tends to be quite responsive to topical media stories relating to teenagers. Paul Ruditis's (2005) *Rainbow Party* deals with the supposed phenomenon among young teenagers of oral sex parties, purportedly known as rainbow parties for the rainbows of different lipstick colours that boys are believed to compare on each other's penises at the end of them. Despite widespread doubt and little or no credible evidence that such parties actually exist, or existed before media attention and Ruditis's novel brought them into existence (see Best & Bogle 2014: 31, 98-99), the novel was commissioned in response to a single episode of *The Oprah Winfrey Show* that mentioned them (see Lewin 2005). I think it is fair to say that early puberty is not as newsworthy an issue as transgender teenagers or as, for example, either immigration, which is explored in Ibi Zoboi's (2017) National Book Award finalist *American Street*, or the police killings of black people that are the centre of Angie Thomas's (2017) *The Hate U Give*, which was released as a film the year after its publication. But early puberty is surely at least as newsworthy as the so-called rainbow party, and has the additional merit of unquestionably existing. And it is demonstrable that Herman-Giddens's research, and other studies like it, have been considered newsworthy, and have had a significant popular and media impact, even if they have been ignored in YA fiction.

## A conspicuous focus-point

In fact, early puberty is considered so newsworthy that Donatella Cozzi and Virginie Vinel's (2015: 290) examination of French and Italian newspaper coverage of early puberty leads them to identify a moral panic around "representations of the child's body, the girl's body in particular", and to argue that "both the medical world and the media single out girls whose body does not conform to ... the expected, non-sexualized body at 6-7 years of age." Working in the UK, Celia Roberts (2010: 433) similarly notes the "highly visible and provocative concerns" and the "panic-provoking and startling discourses" associated with early puberty. And Sharon R. Mazzarella's (2010: 51; original italics) analysis of US newspaper coverage of early puberty finds that "the tone of the coverage and the framing strategies used by journalists" reflect "a continuation of a broader and *ongoing* media and moral panic about youth (girls) growing up too fast". Her headline analysis uncovers a reliance on:

such resonant words and catch-phrases as: "risks," "vices," "disorder," "emotional hurdles," and "problems." Moreover, [early puberty] is a "challenging" trend that parents will be "dealing with." Through their application of negative buzzwords about youth that already resonate with an adult readership, these headlines positioned early puberty as a cause of other problems in girls.... (Mazzarella 2010: 44-45)

The European headlines quoted by Cozzi and Vinel (2015: 290; my italics) make use of comparable alarmist and resonant terms:

*"Concerns over precocious puberty in young girls"* (Agence France-Presse, La Presse, 2001), ... "Little girls, *ripe* before their time. The psychological *risks* of precocious puberty" (*Le Point*, 8/9/2012), "Montpellier: more *warnings* on precocious puberty" (*Midi Libre*, 5/2/2014).

With this level of cultural visibility and this problematized status, early puberty would seem to present a rich lode of YA story potential. Certainly, it has proven to be a rich lode of biomedical research potential. Rachel Blumstein Posner (2006: 317) rightly states that “Herman-Giddens and her colleagues captured the attention of researchers as well as the media”. Mazzarella (2010: 47) finds that it was “not until the 1997 publication of Herman-Giddens study that newspapers (and the medical establishment) began framing early puberty as a widescale phenomenon.” And Roberts (2013: 144) describes a veritable “flurry of related articles in the journal *Pediatrics*,” some endorsing and some disputing the study’s findings. Notable endorsements include the proposal by Paul B. Kaplowitz et al. (1999: 936) of a change in the guidelines for “when a girl with early puberty should be evaluated and considered for medical therapy.”<sup>41</sup> From the other side, Lorah D. Dorn and Deborah Rotenstein (2004: 177) argue that among:

“practitioners of such specialties as pediatric endocrinology and adolescent medicine, the article is controversial, and concern has arisen that if early puberty is not evaluated appropriately, significant pathology (e.g., endocrine disorder, tumor) could be missed.”<sup>42</sup>

Appropriately, then, Roberts (2010: 433) sees the Herman-Giddens article as one of the “key papers” in “a complex scientific debate about norms and clinical guidelines, raising both political and physiological questions about whether the changes in girls’ development should be considered pathological and treated”.

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<sup>41</sup> There has been no official change in response to this proposal (see Kaplowitz & Bloch 2016: e2).

<sup>42</sup> Dorn and Rotenstein (2004: 179, 177) furthermore discuss several significant methodological concerns associated with the study. Similar findings to those of the Herman-Giddens study have, however, been reported in two subsequent studies (Wu et al. 2002; Biro et al. 2010) that, between them, avoid all the serious methodological problems of that study.

Roberts (2013: 147, 150) wishes to “bring the relevant scientific and biomedical debates into critical conversation with wider public concerns about girls’ sexuality” because, she thinks, there is value for “feminist theorists, policy-makers and others interested in girls’ sexual development in taking scientific work in this field seriously”. She suggests, in explanation, that:

moving closer to the biomedical and scientific discourses articulating early puberty will help feminist theorists engage critically with the evolving clinical *and* cultural practices forming this phenomenon and broader contemporary sexual cultures. (Roberts 2013: 150; original italics)

I share Roberts’s belief that such discourses may further and enrich feminist understanding of not only clinical, but also cultural, formations of early puberty, including fictional ones. The experience of early puberty is a fundamentally and crucially embodied one, and to consider early puberty but ignore these discourses that shape and even, at times, dictate our interpretations of our bodies, and our practices in relation to them, is simply to consider a picture that is incomplete in quite critical ways. The Herman-Giddens article seems to me, thus, to be a useful axis around which to consider both medical and popular – including YA literary – attitudes to early puberty in girls.

### **Discomfiture and childhood innocence**

These cluster, I believe, around a discomfiture that explains much of the silence on early puberty in YA writing. Quite simply, I would argue that adults – parents, doctors, medical researchers, and writers – do not want to see early puberty in

girls. It calls into question what we think we know about childhood and adulthood and, most importantly, the boundaries between them; it unsettles us, makes us uncomfortable and self-conscious, so we would prefer it not to exist. Our response is markedly gendered. Carolyn Latteier (1998: 17) suggests, for example, that “early-maturing boys tend to be stereotyped as powerful and early-maturing girls, as promiscuous”, while DeAnna B. Brown et al. (2013: 108) state that “sexually precocious males are often perceived as more mature, attractive, and smart, and are often given more leadership roles than later developing boys”.<sup>43</sup> Our response is also markedly driven to and by action. Our discomfiture colours precocious and early puberty in girls as a problem (possibly for girls; certainly for adults) that should preferably be solved by being medicated or, in YA fiction, silenced out of existence. Any medical solution to this problem framed by adults must, of necessity, be executed – at potentially significant cost in pain and other side effects, both physical and mental – exclusively upon the bodies of children, particularly girls. Similarly, the fictive solution of simply denying such girls a heroine’s voice must, of necessity, be

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<sup>43</sup> The gendered nature of stereotyped perceptions surrounding early puberty accords with the gendered focus of scholarly and popular interest in it. As Posner (2006: 315) notes, most “research into early pubertal maturation has focused on females; there has been little interest in male development.” According to Cozzi and Vinel (2015: 287-288), girls are also the most common focus of concern in reports about “early sexualization” by “public agencies in a number of countries in Europe and North America”. A second study by Herman-Giddens et al. (2001), on early puberty in boys, was published four years later than the research on girls, with no comparable media attention. This is unsurprising, as Mazzarella (2010: 42) finds that:

More than three-fourths (78.2%;  $n = 61$ ) of the U.S. newspaper articles on early puberty appearing in the LexisNexis database focused solely or primarily on the problem as it affects girls, with only 15.4% ( $n = 12$ ) mentioning girls and boys equally or just referring to “children” in general. Five articles (6.4%) specifically addressed early puberty as an issue for boys.

executed – at potentially significant cost in silenced, othered, lonely marginalization – exclusively upon the reading identities and identifications of already-othered girls. It appears, thus, that popular and medical discomfiture surrounding early puberty in girls in effect produces early-developing girls as somehow to be held responsible for this quirk of their bodies.

Such discomfiture is exemplified in Herman-Giddens’s public statements about her research. *South Coast Today* (Jennings [1997] 2011) reports that Herman-Giddens:

said the results [of her research] raise two important questions: Why is this happening, and what can we do to stop it? “There’s something that’s not right, not natural, for girls 5, 6, and 7 to start dealing with pubic hair,” said Herman-Giddens. “The age of childhood has been shortened too much. We need our kids to be kids.”

The first and most important question raised by Herman-Giddens’s findings should surely be “Is it *necessary* for us to do anything about this?”; depending on the answer, a second important question, “*What* is it necessary for us to do?”, might be indicated. Herman-Giddens’s study neither raises nor addresses either of these questions, but it appears that she regards the answers – action is necessary, and the action that is necessary is to ‘stop it’ – as self-evident. She assumes, without evidence or investigation, that the decrease in pubertal age of onset is ‘not natural’<sup>44</sup>, and she reveals an undertone of moral aversion when she states vaguely, but meaningfully, that it is ‘not right’. I have been a nine-year-old

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<sup>44</sup> The possible role of natural factors should not, however, be ignored without due consideration, given that improved circumstances and nutrition are hypothesized to explain historical decreases in the age of pubertal onset (see Posner 2006: 317) and disproportionate rates of early puberty in transnationally adopted children (see Parent et al. 2003: 678).

with conspicuous breasts, and pubic hair, who took an overwhelming pleasure in Lego and hide-and-seek. Herman-Giddens's discomfiture, her traces of aversion and horror at the unnatural, would have been familiar and recognizable to me at the time even though I probably did not yet know the word 'discomfit'. But neither my own experience of the disjuncture between my body and my mental or chronological age, nor any of the research I have read, offers convincing evidence that the possession of a somewhat adult-looking body necessarily implies that a child is no longer a child.

*The Poet X* (Acevedo 2018: 205) explores this issue in 'Cuero', a poem that represents some of X's thoughts while her mother condemns and abusively punishes her for kissing Aman.

### **Cuero**

"Cuero," she calls me to my face.  
The Dominican word for *ho*.

This is what a cuero looks like:  
A regular girl. Pocket-less jeans  
that draw grown men's eyes. Long hair.  
A nose ring. A lip ring. A tongue  
ring. Extra earrings. Any ring  
but a diamond one on her left hand.  
Skirts. Shorts. Tank tops. Spaghetti  
straps. A cuero lets the world know  
she is hot. She can feel the sun.  
A spectacular girl. With too much  
ass. Too much lip. Too much sass.  
Hips that look like water waiting  
to be spilled into the hands  
of thirsty boys. A plain girl.  
With nothing llamativo – nothing  
that calls attention. A forgotten girl.  
One who parts her hair down the middle.  
Who doesn't have cleavage. Whose mouth

doesn't look like it is forever waiting.  
Un maldito cuero. I am a cuero, and they're right.  
I hope they're right. I am. I am. I AM.  
I'll be anything that makes sense  
of this panic. I'll loosen myself from this painful flesh.

See, a cuero is any skin. A cuero  
is just a covering. A cuero is a loose thing.  
Tied down by no one. Fluttering  
and waving in the wind. Flying. Flying. Gone.

In the vernacular, a *cuero* is, as X says, a prostitute or promiscuous woman. Literally, it is a piece of leather, skin, or hide: “any skin”, and thus “just a covering”. Take a “regular girl” and dress her up and, the poem suggests, you have a *cuero*. Dress her down, and she is again simply a girl. The difference lies in nothing more than superficial coverings that “draw grown men’s eyes”. And it is not the surface differences, but a fundamental similarity, that is emphasized by the structure of the poem, which joins a “spectacular girl” and a “plain girl” in one stanza instead of separating them, and shifts from descriptions of one to descriptions of the other within a single line, minimizing the shift and, with it, the differences. To be a *cuero*, the poem suggests, is skin-deep rather than essential.

The *cuero*'s surface covering is, nevertheless, designed to draw sexual attention. A tongue ring, for example, is a piercing particularly vaunted for sexual pleasure and play.<sup>45</sup> The *cuero*'s lip ring draws attention to her mouth, “forever waiting”, and to the sexual promise of the pierced tongue within it, just as the poem draws

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<sup>45</sup> The Urban Dictionary website (GGAllin25 2014: n.p.), entirely unreliable as to fact but a useful indication of colloquial usage and popular perception, includes the following among its definitions of ‘Tongue ring’: “Admission or outright advertisement that you will perform oral sex on just about anyone.” For other popular claims about tongue piercings and sex see, for example, the Piercing Ideas website (Ideaspiercing 2013: n.p.).

attention to the same promise with its placement of ‘tongue’ at the end of the line in “A tongue / ring”. “With too much / ass” similarly draws attention to the phrase “too much” by placing it at the end of the line: specifically, the *cuero* has “too much / ass”, but generally, she simply has – or is – too much, too excessive. She has too much jewellery, too much skin in her tank tops and spaghetti straps and shorts and (presumably short) skirts. She has, perhaps, as X’s mother puts it, “a little too much body” (Acevedo 2018: 5) to go with “Too much lip”, suggesting not only too much “sass”, or playful, flirtatious boldness, but also too much voluptuous sensuality in her mouth, her “cleavage”, her overfull hips “waiting / to be spilled”, and the already-excessive “ass” which will be made to increase in apparent size and curvaceousness by her pocketless jeans.<sup>46</sup> The *cuero* relishes being too much. She constructs herself purposely for sexualized excess and spectacle.

“A plain girl”, by comparison, has nothing “llamativo”, or striking. It is precisely the fact that she has “nothing that calls attention” that makes her the opposite of a *cuero*. Rather than having “Too much lip”, she has a mouth that “doesn’t look like it is forever waiting.” In contrast to the hyperfeminine “long hair” of the *cuero*, she wears a young-looking middle part<sup>47</sup> and makes herself look girlish, innocent, not one to “draw grown men’s eyes”.

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<sup>46</sup> For fashion industry observations on the effect on visual perception of pocketless jeans see, for example, Jo Adams (2002: n.p.) or June Ambrose and Richard Buskin (2006: n.p.).

<sup>47</sup> For a celebrity hairstylist’s perspective on the childlike associations of middle parts see Paul Warren, quoted by Jessica Chou (2017: n.p.)

X 's clothes are normally conservative rather than sexy or revealing. She has “nothing llamativo – nothing that draws attention” except for her body. A plain girl might be a “forgotten girl” – a wallflower – because, like X's surface coverings, she does not draw attention to herself. Or, with her girlish hairstyle and lack of cleavage, a plain girl might be a girl who is in reality young: the forgotten young girl that X was before she had cleavage and her body began to draw attention regardless of her unspectacular surface coverings. Described in one stanza, juxtaposed over one line, the *cuero* and the plain girl are one in X. Her cleavage calls so much attention to itself that it is equivalent to all the *cuero*'s spectacular coverings. With no lip, no sass, no rings, no pocketless jeans and no spaghetti strap tank tops, X's cleavage is all that is required to impose on her the covering label of *cuero*. A plain (little) girl is instantly transformed by cleavage.

But if, as the poem suggests, in reality a *cuero* “is just a covering”, then beneath the covering skin, presumably, the (plain) little girl remains. The covering has transformed and indeed defined her, but its transformation and definition run no more than skin deep. The only way for its transformation to reach the essence of her is if it is an identity forced upon her by the assumptions and insistence of others, if she is denied the state of childhood and prohibited from understanding herself in any way other than that which is suggested to others by her body – as indeed happens to X:

.... I am a *cuero*, and they're right.  
I hope they're right. I am. I am. I AM.  
I'll be anything that makes sense  
of this panic.

Lydia Kokkola (2013: 32, 34) explains how “sexual innocence” has come to be

seen as a defining feature of contemporary Western conceptions of childhood, and she argues that such innocence has come to be understood as “a bodily property, rather than a quality of mind”, because such an understanding bolsters the defining role of innocence: “if a property is assumed to have a biological derivation, then it may be regarded as being ‘natural’.” Kokkola (2013: 34) points out, furthermore, that “conflating childhood innocence with sexual inexperience has another biological logic behind it: the on-set of puberty can easily be treated as a ‘natural’ end to childhood.” This is precisely the ‘biological logic’ that covers over the childhood of a girl such as X, traps her into a sexualized role before she wants or identifies with it, and ultimately labels her a virginal *cuero*. Kokkola (2013: 21, 36) rightly gives this biological logic short shrift and describes “childhood innocence” as a “myth” – and one, moreover, that children and teenagers “play no part in forming” – and she argues powerfully and logically that “the notion of childhood innocence is inherently problematic in and of itself.” I agree with her, but that is immaterial. Even if innocence were in fact definitive of childhood, sexual innocence would nevertheless not be a bodily property: capacity is not the same as experience, or even desire. Having a sexualizable body thus cannot automatically imply lack of innocence in a child, although an adult’s sexualization of a child’s body does almost certainly imply some form of lack of innocence on the part of the adult. Our collective, if often unconscious, acknowledgement of this is what makes a sexualizable child’s body so discomfiting to us.

So if ‘we’ do indeed ‘need our kids to be kids’, then that is surely a need for which adults must take responsibility, rather than a problem that children must take de

facto responsibility for averting. If it is indeed necessary for us to do something to stop early puberty, as Herman-Giddens (in Jennings [1997] 2011) suggests, then interventions that place the responsibility for the change on adults include considered responses to social factors thought to be associated with early puberty, such as family stress (see Mensah et al. 2013: 119; Golub et al. 2008: S221), as well as investigation and management of suspected environmental triggers, such as endocrine-disrupting chemicals (see Parent et al. 2003: 684; Brown et al. 2013: 104). I would however argue that what is, to appropriate Herman-Giddens's words (in Jennings [1997] 2011), "not right" is the idea of intervening *medically* in a relatively common variation in children's development because of the needs of adults. A clinical report for the American Academy of Pediatrics (Kaplowitz & Bloch 2016: e4, e5) offers the clinical guidance that "the majority of cases [of precocious puberty], especially in girls, are benign, normal variants that do not require extensive testing or treatment."<sup>48</sup> But the discomfiture surrounding girls' early puberty is evident in the frequency with which stopping it, in practice, entails casting it as a problem and pathologizing it through medical prescription, regardless of the medical need of the child.

### **Pathologizing through prescription**

Adult discomfiture is commonly framed as an important, even decisive, factor in medical decisions surrounding early puberty in girls. For example, discussing

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<sup>48</sup> The minority of cases that are associated with some sort of medical pathology should, of course, be treated as the medical problems that they are.

specifically that majority of girls whose early puberty is not associated with any pathology, Golub et al. (2008: S220) state that menarche before the age of ten “generally is of great concern to parents and may require suppressive treatment”; they regard “additional parental anxiety” as a pertinent consideration in “therapeutic decisions” regarding such girls. A similar medical confusion about who should be considered the appropriate object of relief when prescribing treatment for early puberty can be seen in Cozzi and Vinel’s (2015: 293) interview with a candid Italian paediatric endocrinologist. If it were entirely clear who this doctor regarded as the primary beneficiary of his treatment, then it might be easier to work out from context to whom each ambiguous pronoun refers, when he explains:

I am before upset parents who need to know whether to start any therapy – and then, when it all gets stopped: ‘Ah!’, they feel relieved. We have worked hard on it: to sleep easy, I give them a couple of years’ therapy. We keep them still, we bring them to the proper age – and this is a great relief for them....

And, in commentary on ‘Precocious Puberty: A Parent’s Perspective’, published in the *Archives of Disease in Childhood* of the *British Medical Journal*, the commissioning editor of the journal (Mann 2002: 320, 321) shows sympathy for “the plight of parents” during a “difficult time for the parents”, and describes precocious puberty as a “devastating condition for parents and children”.

While it is thus often adult discomfiture that drives demands for medical intervention in early puberty, the treatment for this ‘devastating condition’ must be endured solely by the children, although it is a treatment that is questionable for several reasons. Firstly, the stated aims of treatment do not always fit its

proven outcomes. According to Silvano Bertelloni and Giampiero Baroncelli (2013: 1627), the “gold standard” for treatment for central precocious puberty (CPP) is monthly gonadotropin-releasing hormone analog (GnRHa) therapy. The reasons given for GnRHa prescription, according to a comprehensive review of research on GnRHa use by Jean-Claude Carel et al. (2009: e753) that represents the consensus of two of the largest paediatric endocrinology organizations in the world, are commonly to help young girls who may be unable to adapt to menarche, and to prevent the adult shortness or “psychosocial difficulties” that are associated with early puberty. The Carel et al. (2009: e753) consensus statement finds, however, that there are several other options for suppressing menstruation; that the efficacy of GnRHAs in preventing shortness is undisputed only in girls who begin puberty before the age of six; and that data “regarding the psychosocial impact of untreated or treated CPP are inconclusive, and whether delaying puberty with GnRHAs may improve social functioning is still an open question.” For girls who begin puberty after the age of six, in other words, GnRHAs either can be replaced or have not been proven effective in treating the things for which they are most often said to be prescribed.

Their use is questionable, secondly, because in most cases for which they are considered to be indicated they serve no medical purpose, and because in many cases in which they are prescribed they are not considered to be indicated. The American Academy of Pediatrics (Kaplowitz & Bloch 2016: e4, e5; *my italics*) defines CPP with reference to girls younger than eight and, as mentioned above, describes most cases as “benign, normal variants that do not require extensive testing *or treatment.*” But GnRHa therapy is frequently prescribed not only in

such benign, normal cases of CPP, but even in (presumably still more benign and still more normal) cases of puberty that is merely early – and sometimes only very slightly early. T. Tuvemo et al. (2004: 1457) administered GnRHAs to a sample of girls whose age at the start of treatment ranged from 6.7 to 9.7 years, with a mean of 8.3 years. Treatment continued for a minimum of two years. D. Mul et al. (2005: 185, 186) gave GnRHAs to girls who were up to ten years old when their treatment began. The mean age was 9.6, and treatment lasted for three years. In both these studies the mean age was thus above the limit for CPP, and in some of these girls puberty must have been suppressed until far beyond the normal age. Importantly, however, Mul et al. (2001: 966) originally designed their study to include a control group that would not receive GnRHAs, but this control group had to be omitted because the parents of all the girls randomly assigned to it “refused further participation in the study as GnRHa treatment could be obtained elsewhere.” This suggests not only that doctors in the Netherlands, where the study took place, at the time of the study were known to be willing to prescribe GnRHAs to delay puberty in girls around 9.6 years old, but also that the parents of such girls regarded the treatment as imperative.

But this treatment is in fact questionable, finally, because its side effects are far from negligible. GnRHa therapy can slow growth (Mul et al. 2005: 185; Tuvemo et al. 2004: 1456), most ironically calling into question one of the commonly stated aims of the treatment. In one study (Mul et al. 2001: 968, 970), GnRHa treatment was associated with a seven-point decrease in IQ; in another (Wojniusz et al. 2016: 5, 7), the mean IQ of the girls undergoing treatment was eight points lower than that of the control group. (Both these findings were

dismissed as irrelevant or insignificant by the researchers.<sup>49</sup>) Peter Hayes (2016: 15) reports that:

To ensure compliance, the drugs are typically delivered by periodic intramuscular injection, which explains why the most common side effect, according to the label of leuprolide acetate, the dominant GnRHa in the USA, is pain. Other common side effects are “acne/seborrhea, injection site reactions including pain, swelling and abscess, rash including erythema multiforme, vaginitis/bleeding/discharge, increased weight, headache, and altered mood” (Takeda Pharmaceutical Company Limited, 2013: sect. 17).

The burden of treatment that doctors and parents impose on early-developing girls is thus a consequential one – particularly for a hormone therapy that has no medical necessity and has proven efficacy, for girls who begin puberty after the age of six, in nothing at all beyond suppressing puberty itself. It is difficult not to conclude that, for many of the parents and prescribing doctors involved in these cases, that is perhaps all the efficacy that is sought. If this is so, then the disproportionate nature of the response represents ample evidence of adult

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<sup>49</sup> During the Mul et al. (2001) study, the mean IQ of the subjects dropped from 100.2 to 93.1 after treatment. Mul et al. (2001: 970, 968) hypothesize that “withdrawal of exposure of the brain to sex steroids brings the child back to a more age-appropriate IQ range”, and dismiss their finding as “not clinically relevant”. One imagines, however, that it might have some relevance for the children’s lived experience. And since IQ is a measure of intelligence “compared to the statistical norm or average for ... age (which is taken as 100)” (*Oxford English Dictionary* 2019: n.p.), a score of 100.2 is, by definition, a nearly perfectly age-appropriate score.

Wojniusz et al. (2016: 5) state that the difference between the mean IQs of 94 and 102 in their treated and control groups is “not significant”. Given the small size of their sample, it is true that the difference is not statistically significant. But, again, one imagines that the difference might be more significant in the girls’ lived experience than it is statistically, and I, like Hayes (2017: 1), find it difficult to accept the unqualified conclusion that “the findings suggest that GnRHa treated CPP girls do not differ in their cognitive functioning ... from the same age peers” (Wojniusz et al. 2016: 10).

discomfiture with early puberty in girls, and of the power of this discomfiture to shape the lives and experiences of girls who develop early.

### **“Pathological responsibility”**

This shaping influence extends beyond medical treatment itself, and directly affects how these girls are seen, and may see themselves. Regardless of whether treatment for early puberty is appropriate or not, Cozzi and Vinel (2015: 294) argue that the pathologization of early puberty creates a medical narrative of “pathological responsibility; thus the child is made responsible for its own body”. This is in direct contradiction of the idea of childhood innocence which, as Kokkola (2013: 22) states, implies an “inherent onus on adults to take responsibility for and protect children”; as Hayes (2016: 9) points out, the medical approach instead “puts the onus of changing on the child to ensure that she fits into a typical puberty timeframe.”

And YA literature places a corresponding onus on the teenager who develops early to ensure that she fits in. She is almost always reading through the focalization of a heroine who has developed on time, or late: whose body is unremarked and unremarkable, or who complains constantly about her lack of breasts, like Mia Thermopolis in Meg Cabot’s (2003) *The Princess Diaries*, or Kayla Dean in Sherri Winston’s (2007) *The Kayla Chronicles*. Apart from *The Poet X* (Acevedo 2018), the books discussed in this thesis were not selected with any thought to the body types of their heroines. Nevertheless, the heroines of

*Deadlands* (Herne 2011), *Dark Poppy's Demise* (Partridge 2011), *Empress of the World* (Ryan 2001), *Pink* (Wilkinson 2009), and *Double Feature: Attack of the Soul-Sucking Brain Zombies/Bride of the Soul-Sucking Brain Zombies* (Hartinger 2007) have unremarked bodies. The bodies of Min, in *Why We Broke Up* (Handler 2012), and Bella, in *Twilight* (Meyer 2005; 2006; 2007; 2008), are unremarked except with regard to their size (Handler 2012: 80, 156, 219, 220) or weight (Meyer 2005: 105). Katie, in *Sidekick* (Radloff 2010), is the only heroine with large breasts (Radloff 2010: 25), but was a particularly late developer who describes herself as having been “flat as a pancake” until she was sixteen (Radloff 2010: 25). Outside the singular exception of *The Poet X* (Acevedo 2018), if a girl who developed early sees a body like her own in her YA reading, that body belongs to a peripheral character. Such a girl enjoys only the slightest fictional representation, and that almost always from a perspective that invites her to identify with a view of herself as other: the responsibility is imposed on her to efface herself from her reading, as in her books she is effaced from the world.

With a common discursive foundation in adult discomfiture with, and childhood responsibility for, early puberty, medicine and YA fiction thus each seek, in their own ways, to unmake the girl who begins puberty early. The media, as discussed above, make so much of her as to suggest a moral panic (see Cozzi and Vinel 2015: 290; Roberts 2010: 433; Mazzarella 2010: 51). Media discourses inevitably reflect a tendency towards the sensationalism and alarmism observed by Mazzarella (2010: 53) and Cozzi and Vinel (2015: 289), and the popular media are in no way constrained by the medico-scientific imperative to neutrality. I read the media panic around early puberty, thus, as both sensational

for sensation's sake, *and* possibly a clearer and truer expression of the adult discomfiture with early puberty that is frequently to be inferred in medical research and practice. I consider it telling, then, that Mazzarella's (2010) study of US newspaper coverage of early puberty uncovers a tendency to impose not only responsibility, but even actual blame, on girls who experience early puberty. There is an undisputed association between obesity and early puberty (see Carel et al. 2009: e756), but obesity is not the only cause of early puberty (see Brown et al. 2013: 104; Golub et al. 2008: S218), and medical science makes no claim to have identified all the causes (see Golub et al. 2008: S218). In Mazzarella's (2010: 50) study, however:

it becomes apparent that [the] headlines created a unified discourse that blamed girls for being fat – their own “inactivity” has created this “real problem,” and “fat” is the “key cause.” ... It is interesting to note that not a single headline heralded “improved nutrition” as a cause of early puberty. Rather, it was “obesity” that was blamed.

Mazzarella (2010: 51) argues that:

the majority of the articles include obesity as a cause for early puberty in girls because, unlike a focus on environmental toxins, obesity puts the blame on the victim – youth themselves are to blame for their own overeating and inactivity, therefore bringing this upon themselves.

Mazzarella (2010: 51) thus concludes that her study identifies “a distinct narrative ... in which girls' bodies are constructed as transgressing culturally prescribed dictates of childhood innocence”. Shifting focus from medical to media writing thus exposes a subtle, but critical, development in the discourses surrounding early puberty, from an already-questionable narrative of innocence that is lost, to an unequivocally perverse narrative of innocence that is given up.

Such a narrative supports a corresponding shift in perceived responsibility, from the adults who are discomfited by their own guilt in sexualizing young girls' bodies, to the girls who are reframed as guilty for sexualizing their own bodies.

### **“Public edifices”**

Appropriately for this very gendered perception, the focus of the sexualization of these bodies – and the sense of guilty responsibility for them – is the breasts. Latteier (1998: 15; my italics) associates breast development with a changed awareness of and relationship to one's own body when she writes that:

For a growing girl, the advent of body consciousness often comes with the first appearance of breasts.... The body is no longer the me of childhood – that bundle of amorphous pleasures and pains, the me that loves to run and jump and eat ice cream. The body becomes my equipment, my display, and something I own, something *for which I'm responsible*.

For girls whose breasts appear earlier than is usual, this sense of responsibility is magnified by the cultural message that they have transgressed and cannot claim innocence; they are therefore responsible for managing the effects of their bodies in the world.

In a rare qualitative study of women's own remembered experiences of early puberty, Erika Summers-Effler (2004: 29) thus found that girls “who develop breasts early do not passively endure this developmental event. Rather, early breast developers actively negotiated their environment.” For example, Summers-Effler (2004: 38) explains that the refusal of one of her subjects to

wear a bra as a young girl (like my own, long ago) “did not represent rebellion against authority or convention; it was rather a way of denying that she was indeed significantly different from her peers.” In order to “control how much of her body other people saw” (Summers-Effler 2004: 37), another of Summers-Effler’s subjects restricted not only her clothing but also her activities:

I wouldn’t swim.... I quit gymnastics because of it. I wouldn’t get in a leotard because I had breasts.... I was really good at gymnastics.... I was always wearing big clothes. (quoted in Summers-Effler 2004: 35)

A third woman speaks similarly of having worn “a big thick sweater to try to hide” her breasts while the other girls in her class were in “little spaghetti strap dresses” (quoted in Summers-Effler 2004: 35). This woman describes her sense of her own transgression and lack of innocence, and the way she took responsibility for the responses of others to her body:

Men were constantly looking at me, making comments, and touching me. Many times men on the bus and in public would grab my ass or touch my breasts. I didn’t get angry, or even scared, I just accepted that this was what men were like, and this is how I was going to be treated now that I had breasts. It never occurred to me to tell my parents or ask for help, because I thought that there was something about me that was making the men act this way. I tried to control it by wearing bigger and thicker clothes, but it didn’t seem to work. (quoted in Summers-Effler 2004: 35)

As Summers-Effler (2004: 35) points out, this subject’s attempts “to hide and cover her body only further added to her sense of personal responsibility for the treatment she received.”

For Posner (2006: 316-317), puberty “in general (and menarche in particular) has represented a gateway to adolescent sexuality.” But the sense of personal

responsibility felt by Summers-Effler's (2004) research subjects was not associated with their reproductive capabilities. As Janet Lee (1997: 454) states, it is breasts that are the "visible signs of the development from girlhood to womanhood". Latteier (1998: 19; 20) points out that "although girls agonize about their breasts, they breeze through growing pubic hair" because "pubic hair is not public"; she argues that breasts, by contrast, "are public edifices. They are visible, noticed, and commented upon." Susan Brownmiller<sup>50</sup> (1984: 24) furthermore observes:

Although they are housed on her person, from the moment they begin to show, a female discovers that her breasts are claimed by others. Parents and relatives mark their appearance as a landmark event, schoolmates take notice, girlfriends compare, boys zero in; later a husband, a lover, a baby expect a proprietary share. No other part of the human anatomy has such a semipublic, intensely private status, and no other part of the body has such vaguely defined custodial rights.

And yet, despite this vague custodianship, breasts not only are seen; they are seen to communicate. They are public erotic signifiers that are understood as speaking for the girls and women they nominally belong to. Cozzi and Vinel (2015: 290) suggest that boys' puberty attracts less attention than girls' because increased testicular volume "has neither the same visibility nor the erotic significance" of breast development. By contrast, Summers-Effler (2004: 32) states that for contemporary American girls (and I would suggest that much the same is true for contemporary Western girls generally):

the development of an adult feminine body, breasts in particular,

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<sup>50</sup> Anyone familiar with Brownmiller's work will recognize that she and I approach the concepts of pleasure and danger in women's sexuality from different perspectives. Similarly, her interpretation of what she observes about the public status of breasts differs from mine. Her observations themselves, however, are in my opinion acute and unarguable.

takes place within a culture where the shape and form of breasts, and women's bodies more generally, are loaded with meaning. Breasts are the most obvious sign of the sexualized adult feminine body. They are fetishized in contemporary Western cultures, and they constitute the defining feature of sexual attractiveness....

Latteier (1998: 190) writes, thus, that breasts “exist ‘out there,’ as a sign, a password. They define and determine other people's perceptions of a girl's femininity. They express what kind of person she is without her will or consent.” I would strongly argue that they express this, in addition, without her *input*.

Brownmiller (1984: 25) rightly states that “a woman with large breasts is usually assumed to be flaunting her sex or inviting attention.” The girl who develops breasts early is always a girl with large breasts, because breast size is relative as well as absolute, and such a girl has breasts when other girls her age have none, and has developed breasts when other girls her age have breast buds or developing breasts. Her breast size may become normal relative to others by the time she is an adult, but she is larger than average for most of her teens, because that is how long it takes for the average to catch up with her. And, as Leora Tanenbaum (1999: 8) states: “When everyone else in the class is wearing training bras, the girl with breasts becomes an object of sexual scrutiny.” If what is significant about breasts is that they are visible and they are sexual signifiers, then what is significant about large breasts is that their visibility and their sexual signification are obtrusive. They are not only seen; they are necessarily, unavoidably, inescapably seen. Their conspicuousness is such that they are ascribed intentionality; they are understood to be drawing attention to themselves, and to the sexuality both of the bodies on which they are positioned

and of the humans lodged within those bodies. Yet, to point up the obvious, where they are not the result of surgery they neither have nor reflect intent. They are not chosen, put on, or worn. Thus, as Brownmiller (1984: 25; my italics) argues:

The assumption of a ready-to-go sexual nature in big-breasted women is reminiscent of the time when generous sensuality was assigned to large, meaty thighs, and the phrase, “She has no thighs,” implied an erotic stinginess or a sensual failure *that bore no relationship to a woman’s own orgasmic response*.

If breasts are, as Latteier says, ‘public edifices’, such edifices are at least as much discursive constructions as material structures on or of the body, so that the girl that they supposedly express may bear little relation to the girl who follows behind them.<sup>51</sup>

Rachel Millsted and Hannah Frith (2003: 464) thus explain that the large-breasted women they studied (very much like the early-breasted women interviewed by Summers-Effler):

work to negotiate how their bodies can be ‘read’ by others. This control is important, but is not always possible to maintain. Women can display their bodies in ways that can be read as feminine and ‘sexy’, or they can try to avoid their bodies being read in this way (i.e. by wearing t-shirts and baggy jumpers).

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<sup>51</sup> This may be particularly true of the young girl who has developed breasts early. The development of breasts is triggered during the activation of the hypothalamic-pituitary-gonadal axis during gonadarche, a process that is unrelated to the increased secretion of adrenal androgens during adrenarche (Kaplowitz & Bloch 2016: e2). According to Martha K. McClintock and Gilbert Herdt (1996: 178), the findings of “three distinct and significant studies have pointed to the age of 10 as the mean age of first sexual attraction – well before puberty”. McClintock and Herdt (1996: 178) suggest that it is thus adrenarche, which typically begins at ten, that facilitates this first experience of sexual attraction. Following this argument, an early-developing girl may well be years away from her first experience of sexual attraction when her breasts first become visible.

However, despite their efforts, the inevitable visibility of their large breasts, and the coding of large breasts (at least when on slim women) as ‘sexy’ means that despite their efforts their bodies can be read as sexualised.

Summers-Effler (2004: 32) notes: “All of the early breast developers to whom I spoke discussed the sexualized nature of the attention they received for their breasts when they did not, at least initially, behave in ways that invited it.” I would argue that this sexualized attention would have been understood, by many people who encountered Summers-Effler’s subjects when they were girls, as having indeed been invited *by their breasts*. Their breasts would have been understood to have spoken for them, to have invited sexual desire – and thus, implicitly, also to have expressed it.

As mentioned above, Katie, in *Sidekick* (Radloff 2010), is a late developer but, when she does develop, has large breasts (Radloff 2010: 25), like those of Summers-Effler’s early developers. She is brutally punished for the invitation to, and expression of, desire that is read into her body. As Willem, one of the boys at her school, begins to sexually assault her, he sneers, “Who’s panting after who now, I wonder. You slut” (Radloff 2010: 110). He adds: “You think you can walk around, all sexy and dirty with those long legs, and just ignore everybody” (Radloff 2010: 111). He perceives her as flaunting, ‘dirty’, merely because she walks around looking desirable to him, and reveals that her body frames her as promiscuous despite the fact that she ignores ‘everybody’; she is a ‘slut’ because of the desire her body arouses in him, rather than because of her own behaviour or desires. Grabbing her breast roughly as he pins her down, he says “Come on, you bitch, I know you want to play” (Radloff 2010: 111). Even in the moment of

punishing her for the lack of desire that she has always shown, the desire that her long legs and large breasts evoke in him convinces him that her body must, in fact, bespeak desire.

### **Desire and disembodiment**

Like the supposed provocation of Katie's body, the discomfiting nature of the breasts of young girls who experience early puberty – and of the comparatively large breasts of teenage girls subsequent to early puberty – thus relates to their supposed signification of sexuality and of sexual desire. For Mazzarella (2010: 46), what becomes clear from the headlines she quotes – and I agree with her, and see a parallel tendency in the European headlines quoted by Cozzi and Vinel (2015: 290) – “is that early puberty was being framed as a problem for parents as it forced them to confront their daughters' sexuality.” Tanenbaum (1999: 8) explains that a girl “with visible breasts becomes sexualized because she possesses a constant physical reminder of her sexual potential”. Regardless of whether a conspicuous-breasted girl feels herself to be a sexual being or not, or of whether she experiences sexual desire or not, the cultural sexualization of her breasts precludes the possibility of denying that she *might* experience sexual desire and, indeed, causes her breasts to be read as both expressing and inviting such desire. The supposed invitation may arouse a discomfiting desire in some adults, and a discomfiting fear that they might desire in many more. Any actual desires experienced by the girls themselves are most probably moot. The many cracks between the desire believed to be expressed by their breasts, the desire

believed to be invited by them, the desire aroused by them, and the desire feared because of them, are more than wide enough to swallow whatever authentic desires, or absences of desire, the girls might really feel.

'The Last Fifteen-Year-Old' (Acevedo 2018: 151) contains X's thoughts after her first kiss, and suggests the revelatory nature of experiencing her own desire after years of resisting the desires of others.

### **The Last Fifteen-Year-Old**

Okay. I know. It's not that deep to kiss a guy.  
It's just a kiss, some tongue, little kids kiss all the time,  
probably not with tongue (that'd be weird).

Boys have wanted to kiss me  
since I was eleven, and back then I didn't want to kiss them.  
And then it was grown-ass boys, or legit men,  
giving me sneaky looks, and Mami told me I'd have to pray extra  
so my body didn't get me in trouble.

And I knew then what I'd known since my period came:  
my body was trouble. I had to pray the trouble out  
of the body God gave me. My body was a problem.  
And I didn't want any of these boys to be the ones to solve it.  
I wanted to forget I had this body at all.

So when everyone in middle school was playing truth or dare,  
or whatever other excuse to get their first kiss,  
I was hiding in big sweaters, I was hiding in hard silence,  
trying to turn this body into an invisible equation.

Until now. Now I want Aman to balance my sides,  
to leave his fingerprints all over me. To show all his work.

The title of the poem emphasizes the normality of X and Aman's kiss: X suggests that she is the last fifteen-year-old to experience a kiss that is her first. The first

stanza, similarly, argues rationally that the kiss is nothing extraordinary, and the colloquialism that it is “not that deep” – not particularly serious or intense – to kiss a boy, suggests also that it is not particularly penetrating, not particularly suggestive of penetrative sex. But these rational claims are belied by the rest of the poem. For X, this kiss is both revelation and resolution.

She refers to years of being subject to the unwanted desires of others, from boys when she was eleven, to adult men later on. Describing the men as “legit men” (from ‘legitimate’ or ‘legitimately’), she emphasizes the unbelievability and, thus, inappropriateness of their interest by saying colloquially that they are *really* men, *actually* adults; at the same time, she ironically emphasizes the actual illegitimacy of their interest in her, evidenced in the sneakiness with which they look at her. Yet despite her awareness that the men’s desires are illegitimate and inappropriate, and despite the fact that the boys’ desires are unreciprocated, she also refers to years of taking responsibility for the unwanted desires of these men and boys. Her mother implies that if she gets “into trouble” it will be her body that gets her there, and this is a particularly hard stance given that, in ‘Unhide-able’ (Acevedo 2018: 5), X equates her body with her self. But her mother furthermore places upon X the responsibility of extra prayer in order to try to avoid the trouble that her body may bring her into. X sees her body as one given her by God, but nevertheless accepts her mother’s view that her body is “trouble” and “a problem”.

Since she cannot escape from her body, and her mother will not allow her to deny any rightful responsibility for the desires it arouses in others, the only

escape available to her is to try to forget that she has the body that she does entirely – an escape that is doomed to failure, because if her body is indeed, as she has said, unhideable, then it must be also unforgettable. Nevertheless, while other children explore their first desires through ritualized games such as truth or dare, X tries to hide her unhideable body in “big sweaters”; to hide her unhideable self in a “hard silence” that suggests both internal screaming and the knuckles that will later come to speak for her (see Acevedo 2018: 5); and to make her unhideable body “invisible”. In ‘Unhide-able’ (Acevedo 2018: 5), X describes a constant, long-term power struggle with her own body, and thus, unwinnably, with herself. In ‘Cuero’ (Acevedo 2018: 205) she continues at war with her body and herself, threatening: “I’ll loosen myself from this painful flesh.” In ‘The Last Fifteen-Year-Old’ (Acevedo 2018: 151), X’s self and body are as usual engaged in a hopeless battle for control as she tries to forget the unforgettable, to hide the unhideable.

It is only through her desire for Aman, her first experience of a sexual desire that is her own, that she finally begins to make peace with her body. Having seen her body, mathematically, metaphorically, as “a problem” without wanting “any of these boys to be the ones to solve it”, having wanted to be “an invisible equation”, she now wants the two sides of the equation of her body to be balanced by Aman. In the addition of his body to hers there is thus the promise of solution and, with it, resolution – a balanced equation that implies mental balance, harmony, peace. In Aman’s hands on her sides there is, too, the promise of balance in the senses of proportion and equilibrium for the “swinging hips” that were part of what made boys ask her for photographs of herself in a thong, part of what made up “a little

too much body” (Acevedo 2018: 5). She no longer wishes for invisibility or hideability; indeed, she wishes to be marked, for Aman to “leave his fingerprints all over” her and, in the mathematics teacher’s phrase, to “show all his work”. This cannot but also show – discover and make sense of – her body, and with it her self. And it suggests a wish for thoroughness, a process rather than goal orientation, that speaks of true desire and a relishing anticipation of genuine pleasure.

For years X’s own desires have slipped through the cracks of her mother’s prohibitions, of others’ desires and of the responsibility she has been forced to accept for them. For years she has consciously fought to disconnect herself from her body, as part of a fight to maintain a self apart from her body. When she finally allows herself to experience and acknowledge and know her own desire, that desire brings peace between her body and herself. Finally she takes control of her own body, instead of taking responsibility for others’ desires and ceding control to her mother’s wishes. Finally, there is something to her body that is for herself; her desire gives her body a purpose for her, rather than just for others. Finally, thus, she has a powerful reason to connect herself with her body, so that she can begin to embody her own sexuality and to make her own desires, for the first time, the ones that shape her actions.

X’s disconnection from her own body has resisted her desires and made it natural for her to surrender control of her sexuality to her mother and church. She has exemplified what Janet Holland et al. (1994: 24) call “disembodied sexuality”, which, I stated in Chapter Two, resists female desire and makes it

natural for girls to surrender control of their own sexuality to others. The sexualized readings of early-developing girls' conspicuous breasts push them simultaneously towards a resolutely disembodied asexuality – a braless denial or big-sweatered covering of that which might be sexualized or sexualizable about their bodies – and towards a hyperembodied hypersexuality, in which they learn from others' reactions to them to read their own sexualized bodies as inscribing sexual desire merely by being always and overtly present. Constantly paying a price for the desire they are believed to express, they may thus learn early that it is best neither to express nor to feel desire. Conversely, they may decide early that they might just as well give desire free reign, if they are to be punished for it regardless of what they do. Either way, it may be unusually difficult for girls at the centre of such a complex of imagined desires, and desires belonging to others, to be able to recognize their own desires (or their own lack of desire); with bodies always overdetermined and overwritten from outside them, it may be unusually difficult for these girls simply to read their own bodies undistorted, and to know the desires of those bodies. And, as Deborah L. Tolman (2002a: 77-78) demonstrates (and as discussed in Chapter Two):

girls who are not able to sense the presence or absence of their own sexual desire risk becoming dissociated from their own experience and from reality, thereby impairing their psychological integrity and their understanding of what is happening in the world around them.

But – like the possible side effects of GnRHa treatment for early puberty – these risks are routinely minimized or overlooked because girls' sexuality, along with their desire, is problematized in wider adult discourses that depend on denial of girls' sexual pleasure and desire. The supposed expression of desire of

conspicuous-breasted girls, as I have discussed, confronts adults discomfitingly with their own desires, or fears of their desires. It also discomfits us by calling into question the foundations of the system under which we have positioned girls as prefects with devolved responsibility for curbing teenage sexuality from within. As discussed in Chapter One, and as Tolman (2002a: 15; original italics) explains:

Girls' *lack* of desire serves as the necessary linchpin in how adolescent sexuality is organized and managed. To the extent that we believe that adolescent sexuality is under control, it is adolescent girls whom we hold responsible, because we do not believe boys can or will be.

I said in Chapter One that YA fiction has typically been a space for troubling girls' pleasures and desires, and I have mentioned that Beth Younger (2009: 23) observes how girls' desires are frequently "portrayed as abnormal or dangerous" in YA books; that Michael Cart (2010: n.p.) sees puritanical attitudes to sex as part of the tradition of YA writing; and that Roberta Seelinger Trites (2000: 85) argues that YA fiction is "often an ideological tool" used by adult authors "to curb teenagers' libido". Against this background, it is not unreasonable to consider that the pervasive exclusion and othering in YA fiction of conspicuous-breasted girls who experienced puberty early might reflect the popular perception of these girls as sexually flaunting, inviting, desiring, as well as an impulse to avoid the appearance either of pleasure in the desires they supposedly invite or of endorsement of the desires they supposedly feel. Similarly, against the background of adult troubling of girls' desire – and given the ambiguities and inconsistencies surrounding benefit, responsibility, motivations, and side-effect compromises in decisions about GnRHa treatment – I cannot but agree with

Posner's (2006: 320) conclusion that:

underlying the agenda of most research into the antecedents and consequences of early puberty has been a drive to control and limit adolescent girls' sexuality.... This line of research has aimed to determine how sexual behavior among adolescents can be prevented.

### **“Advice not medical control”**

But, even if sexual behaviour among adolescents should be prevented, early sexual activity and other problematized behaviours associated with early puberty, as Hayes (2016: 15) argues, are “matters for advice not medical control.” Instead of such control, Hayes (2016: 9) suggests that one way to address the question of what to do when a girl begins puberty surprisingly early is “to consider how family members and others in the child's circle can re-relate to her in ways that support and accommodate her early maturation.” More strongly, he points out what should surely be no more than common sense: “The alternative to GnRHa treatment for ‘adverse psychosocial effects’ is for parents, physicians, and others such as teachers to fulfil their responsibility to support the child with the challenges of going through puberty at an early age” (Hayes 2016: 16).

The studies reviewed by Johansson and Ritzén (2005: 134):

showed that the social problems of the early girls were associated with certain types of interpersonal relationships in adolescence. Early pubertal timing was an instigating factor for developing heterosexual relationships early.... The early developers, who did not establish early opposite sex relations, were not more likely to be problematic in adolescence.

Johansson and Ritzén (2005: 134) repeat, moreover, that “it is only under conditions that promote access to more advanced peer groups, and particularly opposite-sex relations (often with an older male); that early pubertal timing is linked to problem behavior in adolescence.” While they (Johansson & Ritzén 2005: 134) suggest tentatively that there may “possibly, in some instances” be a role for GnRHa treatment for early puberty, their opinion is thus, much like that of Hayes, that the “best way of avoiding the problematic situations that early-developed girls will encounter in adolescence and the antisocial behaviors that they might develop is probably through family interaction”. Mendle et al. (2007: 152) note, furthermore, on “the mechanism by which early physical development influences the emergence of adverse outcomes”, that psychosocial theories:

are buoyed by empirical evidence that social context is a critical determinant of resilience versus vulnerability for early developers. Although all girls are sensitive to societal responses to their development, social contexts vary in their reactions to and treatment of early maturation.

Barrie Thorne (1993: 138) writes, from a sociological perspective, that “adolescence is *not* a given of biology. Like other age categories, adolescence is deeply cultural; collective beliefs and practices organize and give meaning to bodily changes, and they redefine the contours of gender.” And Summers-Effler (2004: 30) argues that the “body itself does not constitute the problem of early development; rather the social context in which the body changes determines the extent to which the body matters.” Her research thus finds that the “meaning girls ascribe to the experience of early breast development very much depends on both the specifics of their social context and their strategies for negotiating interactions about their breasts” (Summers-Effler 2004: 29).

Fiction helps shape the social context of its readers' lived experience, and it is itself part of that social context. I argued in Chapter One for the importance and power of YA fiction in teenage girls' sexual education. For girls whose puberty was early, support with the challenges consequent on their early and conspicuous development should form part of such education. YA writing that represents alternative ways of seeing and reacting to early development, suggesting to girls that the fault for any problems they may experience because of their bodies lies not with their bodies, but with other people's reactions to them, would contribute to such support, as would stories that represent a variety of strategies for negotiating interactions about conspicuous breasts. Given the private nature of reading, which I suggested in Chapter One makes it particularly well-suited to girls' exploration of their sexual subjectivities, YA literature could expose girls to possible meanings for their conspicuous breasts that are not distorted by the discomfiture or the desires of others. Most importantly, if it countered the cultural messages that push girls who have developed early and conspicuously towards both disembodied asexuality and hyperembodied hypersexuality, YA fiction could materially reframe the social context in which girls develop ways of living within and relating to their bodies.

This is a very instrumentalist vision of YA fiction, but YA books are already highly instrumental in this area. Their overwhelming silence on, and silencing of, conspicuous-breasted girls who have experienced puberty early are already a material contribution to the discourses that effectively other and unmake these girls. They are already a material component of the social contexts that teach these girls to be as discomfited by themselves as others are by them. (And they

are also already a material component of the social contexts that direct this discomfiture in other children and teenagers.) From at least as far back as *Little Women* (Alcott [1868] 1947), there has been a long tradition in which books for teenage girls represent themselves as, and are represented as, a refuge and solace for girls who feel different and out of step with their worlds. For girls who developed early, however, there is no such literary refuge or solace; they are as lonely, as out of step, in their reading as everywhere else. As I stated at the beginning of this chapter, YA books perform a normalizing and normative function upon their readers, whose three options when reading YA writing are thus to have the kinds of bodies that are represented as unremarkable and invisible, to force their bodies into an approximation of these kinds of bodies, or to read continually against themselves as embodied beings. Rather than supporting the impossible aspiration of a cultural and ideological neutrality that facilitates the construction of an unremarkable body as a sort of Everybody that represents every body, I thus wish to draw attention to the instrumentalism in relation to early puberty that already – presumably, in the vast majority of cases, unintentionally – exists in the genre. And I wish to suggest that it would be far more helpful to these girls if their books were intentionally instrumental in supporting them, rather than unintentionally instrumental in further marginalizing them.

There is, after all, the potential in YA writing for a few authors to make a profound contribution to the adjustment and the sense of belonging in the world of conspicuous-breasted girl readers who experienced puberty early. Such girls are subject to teasing, harassment, disapproval, fear and distaste from peers and

adults, strangers and people that they know. They are pathologized by the medical establishment. They are blamed by the media. The inner connection to their bodies that should enable them to recognize the desires signified by their own feelings are smothered beneath the desires and significations heaped onto their bodies from outside. They discomfit all groups not of themselves, and so they learn to be discomfited by themselves. And they are shamefully silenced, marginalized, and othered by the books that are nominally theirs. Against such a consistent, unitary, and united cultural aversion, the novel contrast of even a few books that give these girls a voice that speaks not just of them, but to them, could have an impact disproportionate to quantity, and with it a considerable power to reframe how they see themselves, and how other readers see them.

*The Poet X* (Acevedo 2018) is a book that may have such an impact, and such a power. It is novel – very possibly unique – in representing a conspicuous and early-breasted girl as a focalizing protagonist. It acknowledges both her sexual innocence and her (own) sexual desires. And it gives her a distinctive individual voice and personality, and a full life that includes her family and friends, her school, her church community, and her serious commitment to her poetry, all of which contextualize her body and make it a significant part of her, but no more than a part. Conspicuous-breasted early developing girls need more such books, representing them; dignifying them; clearing spaces in which they may be able to see their own desires unclouded by the desires felt for, or imposed on, them by others; and teasing out identities in which they may be embodied, but not solely defined by their bodies.

## **CONCLUSION**

## Chapter Eight

### A Discourse of Desire: The “Sexiness of Sex”

The novels I have discussed in this thesis have largely supported what I asserted in my introductory chapter: like the older works that came before them, these relatively recent young adult (YA) texts seldom reflect discourses of girls’ desire and pleasure. Neither do they most commonly reflect the straightforward absence of such discourses. Instead, most of these books invoke a discourse of girls’ desire distorted. Furthermore, while it is unsurprising that the gender of most of their teenage heroines is constructed as the wrong gender for desire – endangered by it, inappropriate for it, shamed by it – it is remarkable that so many other aspects of the heroines I discuss seem to have been constructed as wrong for desire too, so that many of these heroines are represented as doubly unsuited for desire.

Daniel Handler’s (2012) story of an ordinary heterosexual girl is one of the minority of stories analyzed here that allows its heroine to speak her desires openly. The discourse of desire that Handler (2012) invokes in *Why We Broke Up*, however, is one of desire quite horribly distorted by shame. Even when Min is at her most lyrical and sentimental about her desire for and pleasure with Ed, her narrative is always shot through with shame; she is never able to separate desire or pleasure from shame. Moreover, the novel is explicit in generalizing the shame it associates with Min’s desire and pleasure to other girls. Min’s discourse of

desire distorted is thus associated with her girlhood. It is her gender that defines her as wrong – shamed and inappropriate – for desire.

*Dark Poppy's Demise* (Partridge 2011) desexualizes Jenna's desire and distorts it into little more than an introductory facilitation for violence. In *Sidekick* (Radloff 2010), in addition to being distorted by being always linked with violence, Katie's desire is represented as, ultimately, better silent. The Mall Rats series (Herne 2011; 2012; 2013) distorts and silences Lele's desire into a dangerous cultural ideal of disembodied, sexually passive femininity, trading active sexual agency for active violent agency, and suggesting that a fighting violent girl is more acceptable than a desiring sexual one. A combined reading of these South African novels suggests that Jenna, Katie and Lele's gender is wrong for desire – that, as girls, they must sacrifice desire and pleasure to violent danger. In addition, while none of the novels makes an explicit link between South African violence and girls' desire, what the novels have in common, apart from violence and their construction of girls' gender as wrong for desire, is their South African setting. A combined reading thus suggests, also, that South Africa, in its pervasive violence, is a country that is wrong for girls' desire – that girls' desire can never be separated from violence, that danger leaves no place for pleasure, in this setting. Girls' desire and sexuality in American or British YA books may be punished by violence, by pregnancy, by the sort of shame and sadness experienced by Min in *Why We Broke Up* (Handler 2012). Lele's pregnancy, in *Army of the Lost* (Herne 2013), is both unexpected and unwanted, but it neither is, nor is it represented as, very pressing among Lele's many and critical problems – most of which have their beginnings in, or are to be resolved in,

violence. In South African YA novels featuring sexuality, it is violence that is the most common punishment for desire, violence that takes the place of pleasure, violence that is represented as persistently forging a distorted and distorting link with girls' desire.

The distortion of bisexual desire that is typical of YA fiction is particularly damaging to bisexual girls, who, unlike bisexual boys, are doubly excluded from a discourse of their desire, both by their status as sexual minorities and by their gender. *It's Our Prom (So Deal With It)* (Peters 2012), *Double Feature: Attack of the Soul-Sucking Brain Zombies/Bride of the Soul-Sucking Brain Zombies* (Hartinger 2007), and *Pink* (Wilkinson 2009) all distort their protagonists' desires by minimizing them, monosexualizing them, and replacing them with (negative) stereotype as the defining feature of bisexuality. While I neither imagine nor suggest that any of these books were intended to construct gender-plural desires as wrong, it is difficult to argue that both boys and girls are represented as *right* objects of desire in any of these books.

Girls who experience puberty early and conspicuously have, as far as I have been able to discover, only once been given a protagonist's voice in English-language YA writing. This oversight may be explained with reference to the complex of distortions of desire – of their own desire, of the desire for their bodies, of the fear of desire for their bodies – that centres on them. In other words, it is not these girls' desires that YA fiction silences, but the girls themselves, because of the highly gendered discourses of desire distorted that surround them. Their bodies are read as demanding a response, but the responses they are

constructed as demanding can never be socially appropriate, particularly when adults – including adult writers and book industry professionals – are the responders. One novel is insufficient to fill the gap in representation of these girls: collectively, YA fiction can be said to avoid the response that these girls' bodies are perceived as demanding, by simply looking away, as from a visible deformity. It thus responds to perceptions of these girls' bodies as wrong for desire – for the desires they are assumed, without evidence, to express, as well as for the uninvited desires of others – by silencing the girls and, with them, their bodies and any desires they might feel in themselves.

Among books in which the heroine's sexuality is central to plot and/or character, it would be a noticeable flaw simply to leave a discourse of desire missing. I have described my own experience of bisexual invisibility as more than merely a blank space or gap, but as also an erasure that fills in the gap, obscures the space that might otherwise draw attention to the absence – and thus to the presence – of the bisexual who should be standing there. This experience informs my understanding of the missing discourse of girls' desire in YA writing generally, not only in relation to bisexual protagonists. By invoking a discourse of desire distorted, these novels not only maintain the invisibility of a discourse of girls' desire, but also contribute to the active erasure of such a discourse. They fill in the gap, and obscure the space, that might otherwise draw attention to the genuine discourse of girls' desire in which they should be participating. In this, they recall the nexus of compulsory heterosexuality, postfeminism and the mainstreaming of pornography that, as discussed in Chapter One, has made it necessary for girls to perform or produce themselves as sexually desiring

without regard for their actual feelings of desire, or lack of desire.

The representation of individualizing characteristics as varied as the heroines' locations, the objects of their desire, and their bodies as attributes that position most of the fictional girls considered here in one way or another as doubly wrong for desire begs the question of whether girls' desire in YA fiction is constructed as so intrinsically wrong that almost any particularity must necessarily function to double its wrongness. I think that a great many individualizing characteristics may be, and sometimes are, used (probably in most cases unintentionally) to double the wrongness for desire that is associated with girlhood in the majority of YA books that deal with girls' sexuality. But there are also exceptions that resist such associations, despite, or even with the facilitation of, the sorts of particularities that have in many cases represented further cause to position girls' desire as wrong.

*In Search of Happiness* (Ngcowa 2014) is one such exception that allows its heroine's desire a voice, that celebrates her desire, and that defends it. Like the other South African novels that I discuss, Ngcowa's links desire inextricably with violence. Indeed, it makes this link incontrovertibly causal: Agnes is raped specifically because her desire is lesbian, rather than straight. But this causal link with violence is not one that distorts lesbian desire, because – rather than naturalizing this real-world link – the novel condemns it as criminal, cruel, repugnant and unnatural. Beth Younger (2009: 50) argues that lesbian YA novels are characterized by the provision of “alternatives to the cultural paradigms of heterocentrism, male-centered sexuality, and male dominance.” This suggests

that heterosexual and heteronormative models of gender and sexuality are important factors in the problematization and silencing of girls' desire, and that lesbian desire, by setting itself apart from the regime of compulsory heterosexuality, opens a space for the liberation of a discourse of girls' desire. I think that this reflects a crucial reason why Ngcowa's novel resists the potential for dismissing its heroine's desires as doubly wrong, and instead invokes a discourse of desires like hers.

This cannot, however, explain the novels that resist constructing heroines who desire boys as wrong for desire (whether only because of their gender or also because of any other particularity), and that instead comprehend these heroines, like Ngcowa's, within the hopeful, tentative beginnings of a genuine, undistorted discourse of girls' desire. Unlike lesbian desire, bisexual desire does not automatically enable a heroine to stand outside the gendered restrictions and repressions of heterosexual and heteronormative models of gender and sexuality, such as sexually passive femininity: most of the boys that bisexual girls may desire are heterosexual, and a relationship between a bisexual girl and a boy most often functions, and is always seen, as a heterosexual relationship. And straight heroines are naturally even further from escaping the gendered expectations of heterosexuality and heteronormativity than are bisexual heroines. A different explanation must be sought for the discourses of girls' desire seen in *Empress of the World* (Ryan 2001), *The Poet X* (Acevedo 2018) and *Twilight* (Meyer 2005; 2006; 2007; 2008).

Acevedo's (2018) and Ryan's (2001) novels have in common their heroines'

informed, nuanced interrogations of their own desire. Both X and Nic are intelligent, careful thinkers. Both are critically aware of how their desires are situated within particular cultural and social contexts that exist independently of themselves. Both think and write cogently and analytically about their own embodied feelings and desires. These commonalities perhaps suggest that authors sufficiently intelligent, and sufficiently respectful of the desires and the capacity for depth of discussion of their girl readers, may be able to carve out spaces that, like lesbian spaces that hold themselves apart from compulsory heterosexuality, allow them to engage with girls' desire in thoughtful, interrogative ways that acknowledge the complexities both of desire and of individual and cultural responses to it.

I believe that this is possible, and indeed I would like to see more YA books whose authors do carve out such thoughtful, interrogative spaces for a discourse of girls' desire. But as an explanation for the exceptional books that contribute to the beginnings of such a discourse, it is unsatisfying and incomplete. It is morally unsatisfying to think that YA fiction can provide space for a discourse of the desires only of lesbian and/or reasonably intellectual girls. It is rationally incomplete because it fails to explain why *Twilight* (Meyer 2005; 2006; 2007; 2008) is able to voice a rich voyeuristic and scopophilic pleasure and a fugitive, but powerful, passive ideology celebrating girls' desire and promising pleasure. Danielle Dick McGeough (2010: 91) argues that the "erotics of abstinence acknowledge desire as an active part of abstinence rather than in opposition to abstinence." Lydia Kokkola (2011: 169) sees Bella's desire as "a way to endorse celibacy ... without trivializing adolescent sexual desires." And Anna Silver

(2010: 127) points out, correctly, that fans online “might gleefully comment on Bella’s lustfulness, but for Edward and [Stephenie] Meyer, marriage is the only moral arena for sexual desire.” But, in her presumable intent to use Bella’s sexual desires for the sexy boys in her life as a vehicle to promote abstinence, Meyer – like McGeough, Kokkola and Silver – disregards the point, noted by Holland et al. (1994: 24) and discussed in Chapter One, that sex talk “is itself sexy, so accounts of sexual activity, or discussions of bodily states, can in themselves be physically arousing, erotic, titillating, voyeuristic”. Meyer, McGeough, Kokkola, and Silver all appear to forget what Kokkola (2013: 14, 29) calls “the sexiness of sex”.

And this is what Meyer’s (2005; 2006; 2007; 2008) series has in common with Ryan (2001) and Acevedo’s (2018) very different works: these are all examples of what Levine (2002: n.p.) argues is needed in a sexual education: “the truthful ‘fictions’, the stories and fantasies that carry the meanings of love, romance, and desire.” Each of these three texts offers readers not only a cognitive understanding of Nic, or Bella, or X’s sexual feelings and desires, but also the experience of affective and kinaesthetic identification with these feelings and desires: affective and kinaesthetic knowledge about sex and sexuality. This makes these fictions an ideal safe, private space for girls’ exploration of their own sexual subjectivities. (Quantities of erotic Twilight fanfiction, and the existence of such products as a sex toy that can be cooled in the freezer to an icy temperature like Edward’s and that, like Edward, sparkles in the sun (see Day 2014), suggest that for some readers such knowledge, and such exploration, is indeed erotic.) *Empress of the World* (Ryan 2001) and *The Poet X* (Acevedo 2018) are intelligent, thoughtful novels. But to argue that that is the entirety of what

sets apart their discourse of girls desire is precisely what Jonathan Dollimore (2001: 95) describes when he argues that “benign interpretations” that either miss what is truly significant, or avoid looking at it, constitute a more effective form of censorship than “blunt state censorship”.

What sets these novels apart is a discourse of desire that invokes and evokes desire. It is Nic’s hands shaking as she unwraps a package that Battle has carried under her jodhpurs, against her thighs, because she “can’t stop thinking about where this something has been”. It is Bella’s “electric spark, the ... restless craving to stretch [her] hand across the short space and touch [Edward’s] cold skin” (Meyer 2005: 251). It is X writing, “I want Aman to balance my sides, / to leave his fingerprints all over me. To show all his work” (Acevedo 2018: 151). What sets them apart is the unashamed sexiness of sex. It is “cool night air on skin, hands and mouths moving over each other, the scent of pine mixed with lavender, the sound of breath” (Ryan 2001: n.p.) It is a “rush of heat” flashing across Bella’s skin at the sight of Edward’s clothes abandoned next to the water (Meyer 2008: 36). It is ‘This Body on Fire’ (Acevedo 2018: 191).

### **This Body On Fire**

Walking home from the train  
I can’t help but think  
Aman’s made a junkie out of me:

begging for that hit  
eyes wide with hunger  
blood on fire  
licking the flesh  
waiting for the refresh  
of his mouth.

Fiend begging for an inhale  
whatever the price  
just so long as  
it's real nice.  
Real, real nice.  
Blood on ice, ice  
waiting for that warmth  
that heat that fire.

He's turned me into a fiend:  
waiting for his next word  
hanging on his last breath  
always waiting for the next, next time.

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